

What can we learn from this time in our lives? This weekend is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, because most of the readings address Jesus as the Good Shepherd. I grew up in rural Oklahoma during middle school and high school. One of the biggest pastimes in rural Oklahoma are livestock shows. While I never did personally show animals, I do know a bit about farm life.

One thing which is very real, on the farm, is the idea of a ‘bum lamb’ which is rejected by its mother. It could be for a variety of reasons, but the gist is the ewe, the mother sheep, refuses or is unable to raise her young lamb. This is where the human owner or in our case the shepherd steps in and hand raises, and bottle feeds the young lamb every six hours around the clock. This young lamb then becomes attached and very loyal to the shepherd. So, when the shepherd calls the flock of sheep to move pens or for feeding time, these bum lambs remember their shepherds voice and tender care and come running first. Then seeing the bum sheep headed toward the shepherd, the rest of the flock follows.

In this real-life analogy, we are all the bum lambs. Because during this time of isolation, we all have more than likely experienced something which has separated us from others and has caused us to feel rejected. It might be we did not get to say goodbye to our friends at school or have graduation when we expected. We could have lost some of our income or even employment during this time. We miss seeing our friends, customers and coworkers. We could have lost a large part of our retirement portfolio.

If you are a first responder or in healthcare (thank you for your service), you may be separated from your family to keep them safe during this time. Some of us may have even lost a friend or family to the virus. Regardless, we have all experienced some form of loss in the past seven weeks. Which brings us to our readings.

I love the Liturgical Season of Easter, because we get to hear from the Acts of the Apostles. I suggest if you struggle reading the bible, to start with the Acts of the Apostles, because it is easy to catch the fire and passion the Apostles have for proclaiming the Risen Christ to the world.

In our first reading we hear from Peter. Remember this is the same Peter who betrayed Jesus and who after Jesus rose from the dead, just went back to fishing. He is clearly changed for the better – he is confident – dare I say – he is convicted. Not only has he seen the risen Christ with his own eyes, but now he has the gift of the Holy Spirit to tell the world to change their focus, from secular ways to a focus on God – who is the most important.

Through our baptism God has claimed us as His sheep. He has taken possession of our lives and has now made us sharers in the life of Christ, through our baptism. Now imagine Peter trying to get our attention in the same fashion in our present circumstances.

Peter is calling us to action – because when the crowd asked: ‘What are we to do?’ He commanded them to change their ways.

I pray, one of the greatest gains we may all have from the last seven weeks, is to change our ways, and turn our focus to what matters the most: God, family and relationships. The greatest relationship of all, is our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Which brings us to our responsorial psalm, which is Psalm 23. Of all the Psalms, this one has personal significance to me, because it was my mother’s favorite and is now mine. If you are down cast during this time, might I suggest you spend some time slowly reading this Psalm in a quiet place. Image Jesus sitting beside you, while you are reading. He truly is there with you. He is promising you consolation in this life and the hope of eternal life with Him in this Psalm. This should bring each of us a great sense of peace, we may not be able to find anywhere else.

In our second reading, we hear again from Peter. This time he is telling us we should not be surprised to find suffering in this life. No doubt during this time we have experienced suffering. But the key is knowing we have a Shepherd, whom we can take our suffering to. Jesus understands suffering oh so well. We only have to look at our crucifix to know how much he suffered for each one of us. Let us take our trials and tribulations to Him in our prayers today. As the Divine Shepherd, He tends to our brokenness, our anxiety, our fears and our loss – We only need to remember to turn to Him and ask for help.

Which brings us to our Gospel. Jesus identifies with the role of the shepherd and mentions He is the gate. The idea of a Good Shepherd comes from the Old Testament. God is the Good Shepherd and the prophets foretell of His coming. The visual image Jesus is portraying is of a low stone walled pen which contained the flock, known as the sheepfold. The shepherd would sleep in the opening of the stone walled pen each night to protect their flock and literally be the only thing between the sheep and predators. In this way the shepherd is actually the gate. Jesus is telling us that He is always our protector, but especially in difficult times, when we feel threatened. Jesus is also telling us today, not to follow new or strange ideas, but rather to follow the Truth, which is Him. You might say, Deacon John, so how do we follow Jesus? The way we follow Jesus and know His voice is listening to the Church, and through the scriptures and our encounter with Him in the sacraments.

Which brings us back to the bum lamb. We are all bum lambs – the Church is the flock – and Jesus is our Shepherd – and the Kingdom of God is the sheepfold – the only way to join the flock is to follow Jesus. When you are down, for whatever reason, imagine Jesus picking you up and carrying you. Jesus absolutely loves each one of us, so deeply, that when He died, He took on all those threats, dangers, sin and death, that we face and conquered them, because He loves us as individuals.

Wherever you may be today, spend some quality time with the image of Jesus the Shepherd, tending just to you. Image Jesus healing your anxiety, healing your heart ache, healing your loss, just as a shepherd tends to one lost sheep. Above all else, know, Jesus wants to be with you forever. When you leave the gate – follow Jesus – He will show you the way.

Deacon John C. Harned
May 3, 2020