

Know My Voice Fourth after Easter – 3 May 2020

As I was gathering resources for this week's sermon I went back to the last time I preached on the 23rd Psalm. It was on the 22nd of March. The first Sunday we were unable to meet in person. You may remember, in that sermon I talked about the Psalm exclusively...about how we need not be afraid because God is always with us.

It was a sermon meant to give comfort. It spoke about how much had changed in only a few days. The 22nd of March. And here we are seven weeks later, on the 3rd of May.

We have seen Plexiglas barriers installed in grocery stores, credit unions and other businesses. Most of our restaurants are now providing a limited menu for pick up or delivery. At times we need to wait outside before entering a store in order to limit how many people can be in at once. There are lines on the floor ensuring we stay six feet away. Only two people at a time are allowed in the post office.

We entered this liminal state of Good Friday and have remained there. The day of Easter took place, and it was joyous, yet muted.

We do not know how much longer this will be, that we will be separated. And yet, we hope for the day when we will return to our houses of Worship and and see each other face to face. Touch each other and hug. Chances are, when we gather again it will be in smaller groups. We may be encouraged to gather outside, rather than inside the Church.

This is all still speculation. And though we may feel uncertain and anxious, it is also a time for us to feel hope.

This time of isolation has forced us to be creative in how we connect with one another. I have been phoning my mother more often. Which has been good. I participated in a Zoom dinner party a few weeks ago and last night I took part in a Surprise Birthday party for my Spiritual Advisor and good friend Sue. We did this through Facebook Messenger. There was me in B.C., Sue and her best friend in Ontario. Sue's spiritual advisor Patrick in Tennessee and her daughter Trish in Australia. It was amazing!

I was able to connect with a colleague and friend from the Roundtable on the Crown of the Continent, John Shannon. He and I have not seen each other in more than a year, yet through the joy of Zoom, we had a face to face conversation over a cup of tea on Thursday.

When I am walking on the trails or in a nearly empty downtown Fernie, folks look up and smile, wave and say Hello. I stopped in at the Beanpod on Thursday afternoon to pick up some chocolate treats for my Mam and had a great conversation with the owner. He said he feels fortunate that they are able to remain open, bringing a little bit of normality into an otherwise crazy time for many people.

In our scripture today we hear, once again, the 23rd Psalm. A psalm of comfort in a difficult time. We walk through Death Valley, and we sit at a table with our enemies, yet we are not alone. God is with us. Comforting us, remaining with us. For this life and into the next. What beautiful imagery that is.

The Gospel is from John and it speaks of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In fact, in Year A, the 4th Sunday after Easter is referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. In my former parish in Dorchester, Ontario there was a large triptych window behind the altar and one of the panels was of the Good Shepherd. Jesus, clad in sandals and a robe had a lamb under his arm and a shepherd's crook in another.

Bishops carry large staves with a hook on the end which are similar to a shepherd's crook. This is because Bishops are meant to be the Shepherds of the Diocese. Yet a Diocese is far too large for one person, so priests or ministers are appointed. This is why clergy often refer to the people they serve as their flock.

Many years ago, my Bishop was coming for a visit to St. Peter's. I asked him if he'd mind being the children's focus. He asked if I was asking him to present the Children's focus and I said no. "I want to use you as an illustration". He reluctantly agreed.

That Sunday he arrived with all his finery, travel crozier in hand, mitre perched atop his head and worship started. I called up two sisters who were our only children in Church that day and asked them if they had any questions for Bishop Terry. Now, usually, Hannah was filled with questions, but for whatever reason she was nearly mute. My plan was not working.

I asked if they recognized anything similar in how the Bishop and I were dressed. Hannah's older sister Caitlyn pointed to my feet and the Bishop's feet. I was barefoot, he was wearing loafers. We agreed that we were dressed similarly, but not the same. Someone in the congregation asked why the Bishop was carrying a crozier.

He smiled and pointed to the end of it as though he was going to hit my bare foot. Caitlyn grabbed hold of the crozier, looked the Bishop in the eye and said "NO". The Bishop then handed me the crozier, got on his knees so he could see into her face. He assured her he was joking and would never hurt me like that. She believed him. And she forgave him.

We went on with worship and afterwards enjoyed a time of fellowship in the Parish Hall.

The next week, Hannah asked "where's the boy in a dress"? She meant the Bishop. I laughed and said he had another Church to go to. She said she had a question for him. I asked her to write it down and give it to me and I would give it to him later in the week as I would be seeing him at an event. She gave me the question, written on a piece of paper and folded carefully, and said I was not to look at it. I gave the Bishop her question and at the end of the day he handed me back the piece of paper, again folded over carefully and said I was not to look at it. I never did learn what the question or answer was.

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus speaking in two parables. He speaks of the sheepfold, the pen which holds sheep and how those who enter by a means other than the door are thieves and bandits.

Did you know that in those days the shepherd slept in the doorway of the sheepfold? This was not only to keep the sheep in, but to keep thieves and bandits out. The walls need not be tall to keep the sheep in. Sheep are, mostly obedient, as they know their

shepherd's voice. Just as we know God's voice when God calls our name.

The second part of the parable speaks of Jesus as the gate. The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd and know they are safe. The sheep will enter and exit the sheepfold only through the door because it is the safest way to do so.

Jesus promises that if we follow him, we will come to know and trust his voice and further, if we follow him we may have life and that life will be abundant. The image of pasture takes us back to the 23rd Psalm. Being led beside still waters and green pastures. For me, this pastoral image is a beautiful one.

A place where we can gather to feel the love of God. To hear the birdsong, feel the warm Spring sun on our face. To watch the still water and feel that everything is right with the world.

As you may know, I am an introvert and spending time in my own company is okay, at times, even comforting. For many people who are extroverts, not being able to be in groups has been incredibly difficult. The weather is getting nicer, the temperatures are rising. There is conversation of isolation being lifted in a multi-stage approach.

No today. And not tomorrow.

Truth is we don't know when. We must trust Adrian Dix and Dr. Bonnie Henry to walk us through this time. It will be tempting to break the rules and go visit friends. But we must not. Not yet. We are being tested in every way imaginable. Yet I believe, I truly believe, if we hold fast, breathe deeply, wash our hands and say our prayers we will emerge from this closer to each other and closer to God.

I would never have imagined 7 weeks ago, that we would be in this place. It may be another 7 weeks or even longer before we can gather again. That seems like a very long time. So let's do this. Let's look at one week at a time. And if that's too much, look at one day at a time. And if that's too much, look at one hour at a time.

We can do this my brothers and sisters. Trust me, trust my voice when I tell you that God is with us always. Believe me when I say you are a beloved child of God, loved more today than yesterday, yet not as much as you'll be loved tomorrow.

Thanks be to God.

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Easter 4
Acts 2.42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2.19-25
John 10. 1-10