

OK, first your RISUS PASCHALIS, or Easter joke. Here's one person's review of their experience of the first ten days of Quarantine. Day 1 – I can do this! Got enough food and wine to last 6 weeks! Day 2 – Opening my 8th bottle of wine. I fear my supply will not last! Day 3 – Strawberries: Some have 210 seeds, some have 235 seeds. Who knew? Day 4 – At 8:00 pm, I removed my Day Pajamas and put on my Night Pajamas. Day 5 – I tried to make hand sanitizer. Funny – it came out as jello shots! Day 6 – I put liquor bottles in every room of the house. Tonight, I'm getting dressed up and going Bar Hopping! Day 7 – I struck up a conversation with a spider today. Seems like a nice fellow. He's a web designer. Day 8 – Finding isolation to be far more difficult than I had imagined. I swear my refrigerator just yelled "What the heck do you want now?!" Day 9 – I'm dying for a sports event. Today I watched the birds fighting over a worm. The Cardinals lead the Blue Jays 3-1. Day 10 – I realized why dogs get so excited about something moving outside the house, going for walks or car rides. I think I just barked at a squirrel.

This 4th Sunday of Easter is traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday, because the gospel is always about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and the psalm is one of the all-time favorites – psalm 23, 'The Lord is My Shepherd.' I'd like to focus today on that psalm and some of its implications for our Covid-infected lives.

First, the image of shepherd itself. When we dig into this a bit, it becomes rather amazing and surprising that this is as an image for God at all. We tend to think of fluffy white sheep, and a gentle shepherd carrying the sheep lovingly on his shoulders. But shepherding was listed among the despised trades by the rabbis, along with camel drivers, gamblers, and tax collectors. Shepherds were the used car salesmen of the day. But why were they so despised? Because their work often caused them to walk unaware over grave sites and to come into contact with what was unclean, and they were unable to wash and maintain ritual cleanliness. This meant that they could not participate in community worship. There was also the constant suspicion of forbidden sexual activity with the sheep.

Not only that, but the gentleness of the shepherd, which we generally take for granted, was not necessarily the case. There was a custom among shepherds in Israel that existed at the time of Jesus -- and is still practiced today -- that needs to be understood in order to appreciate the ambiguities of all images for God. Sometimes very early on in the life of a lamb, a shepherd senses that it is going to be a congenital stray, that it will forever be drifting away from the flock. What that shepherd would do was to deliberately break the lamb's leg so that he would have to carry it until the leg was healed. By that time, the lamb had become so attached to the shepherd that it never strayed again.

When he explained this to a group once, Fr. Ronald Rolheiser reported that a woman suddenly blurted out: "I may be dense! But, I broke my leg – and there has been so much that happened in my life following – I get that! 15 years have passed since my leg broke – I prayed at the time for God to heal me – and I have been close to Him ever since! I have gone to church and prayed regularly ever since!" I don't know if this would have happened if I hadn't broken my leg!" It's the same idea. (AGAINST AN INFINITE HORIZON, p. 166-167).

It would be possible to apply this understanding in this time of international pandemic. This coronavirus could be seen as a broken leg for the world – our shepherd trying to get our attention. As a world, we've often acted with the attitude of "If there is a God, fine; if not, fine; I can handle my life quite well on my own thank you – I don't need God -- or church at all." Well, maybe we do – in good times and in bad.

There's another piece to this. I've read that sheep always travel in a straight line, which creates problems when a shepherd calls the sheep farther up a hillside: the animals will not walk around hazardous obstacles, but will walk right off the path, getting hurt in the process. This problem is compounded by the fact that sheep will blindly, habitually, stupidly follow one another – even to their deaths.

In the Highlands of Scotland, when sheep wander off into the rocks and get into places that they can't get out of, shepherds don't go after them immediately. The grass on those mountains is very sweet and the sheep love it, and they will jump 10 or 12 feet from the paths to get at it, and then they can't get back to the path again. The shepherd hears them bleating in distress. They may be there for days, until they have eaten all the grass.

The shepherd will wait until they are so faint they cannot stand, and then he will go to the sheep and put a rope around it, and he will pull that sheep up out of the jaws of death. We might ask: "Why doesn't the shepherd go after the sheep when it first gets in trouble?" The answer is that the sheep are so foolish they would be startled by the shepherd and dash right over the cliff and be killed.

It's hard to imagine creatures who are that foolish and that helpless at times. Except for Homo Sapiens. Human beings. Us.

In April 1988, the evening news reported about a photographer who was a skydiver. He had jumped from a plane along with numerous other skydivers and filmed the group as they fell and opened their parachutes. On the film shown on the telecast, as the final skydiver opened his chute, the picture went crazy. The announcer reported that the cameraman had fallen to his death, having jumped out of the plane WITHOUT HIS PARACHUTE! It wasn't until he reached for the absent ripcord that he realized he was free falling without a parachute. Until that point, the jump probably seemed exciting and fun. But tragically, he had acted with thoughtless haste and deadly foolishness. Nothing could save him, for his faith was in a parachute he never buckled on.

Can we imagine anyone doing anything so stupid? Well, yes, actually. I can. Anyone else ever acted first and thought later? Since you are in your own home as you are listening to this, you can go ahead and raise your hands! Your family knows you! We are a lot more like sheep than we would like to admit.

A while back there was a story in the news about a woman from Missouri who was startled out of a dead sleep one night by some desperate cries of "Help! Help!" You know how it is when you awake to some sound: we are not certain whether we really heard something or if it was just a dream. At first she thought perhaps her husband had cried out, but he was sleeping soundly next to her. Then suddenly she heard the cries again: "Help! Help!" Finally, she threw back the covers and headed downstairs toward their living room. "Help!" went the plaintiff voice again. "Where are you?" the woman asked. "In the fireplace," came the rather shocking answer.

And sure enough, dangling in the fireplace with his head sticking through the flue was a would-be burglar, upside down and quite snugly stuck. The police and fire department got him out eventually, though not before having to disassemble the mantle and some of the masonry. Perhaps the best part of the story was that this woman flipped on all the lights and videotaped the whole thing.

You know, on second thought, maybe SHEEP resent being compared to US! We can do some pretty dumb things! And because we do dumb things, sometimes we pay a very heavy price.

We need a Shepherd, someone to watch over us. We need someone to lead us. We have a staggering propensity to make a mess of our lives. We need a Shepherd more than we often may realize.

And this brings me to my second point – our fears. Most of us have the things we need in life materially. At least we did unless we’ve just lost our job in the last month or so. But many of us live in fear. We’re afraid of losing our job, our health care coverage. We’re afraid about losing our marriage, or our child to drugs, or to a person who will abuse them. We’re afraid of sickness – COVID-19 or cancer, we’re afraid of getting old and being lonely. We’re afraid of failing, afraid of not being loved, afraid to die.

We need to know that Someone will provide for us, will be there for us. We need to know that Someone will protect us. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me with your rod and staff that comfort me.” (Help from DYNAMIC PREACHING, April-June 2005, p. 18-21)

Finally, J.L. Mays makes a fascinating suggestion that Psalm 23 may be a 2 metaphor psalm, the image of shepherd in the first 4 verses giving way to that of Bedouin host in verses 5 and 6. The New American Bible translation shows this in dividing the psalm exactly in this way.

Two laws of the desert would be at issue in this Bedouin host image. On the one hand, there is the law of blood vengeance of Gen 9:6, where a vindicator would enforce that an eye be taken for an eye and a tooth for tooth. The other would be the desert law of hospitality and refuge.

We can see the image in the psalm. Picture a fugitive from blood vengeance fleeing across the desert with the avengers hot on his trail. Ahead lies a black Bedouin tent toward which he speeds with all of his flagging energy. If he can so much as touch the ropes or stakes of the tent, the man will be safe – for the law of desert hospitality would prevail at that point. The Bedouin would spread out a leather hide, as the literal Hebrew indicates, as a table on the ground. He would anoint his uninvited guest’s head with oil, and set out his best provision: “A table in front of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.” Just a little bit away the frustrated pursuers are grim and scowling, looking on, as this banquet unfolds. The fugitive would be safe – but only for a time. The desert law put a limit on this hospitality – “So long as the food is in his bowels” – 2 days and the intervening night. The immunity would be over, and the fugitive would have to face the knives. The hope was that perhaps calmer heads would prevail during that time and a life could be spared and some kind of reconciliation occur.

The fugitive pursued by blood avengers prompted a counterthought in the psalmist. The “pursuers” (literal Hebrew) of his life were “only goodness and kindness.” To have lived his life in the presence of such a loving God was like a continual dwelling in the Temple itself. “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come.”

This whole experience of COVID-19 is a great opportunity to remind us that living in the heart of God is living in the heart of the Temple. It is also a real test of who we are as believers. Do we fear our death? The possibility of death? Or do we recognize that death is just another facet of life. We could die young or old long before anyone even knew the name Coronavirus. We just have a slightly greater chance of doing so at the present time. But the Shepherd was the same 3 months ago as the Shepherd is today. Laying out a table before us, refreshing our souls, guiding us in right paths if we are open to it, walking with us in dark times and offering us courage. If we have left our relationship with the Shepherd slide in our lives, now many of us have more time for prayer and time to reconnect than we’ve ever had before. And this Shepherd who never ceases

to seek us out, never scolds us when we try to resume relationship with Him. No, He rejoices – if we were lost, we’re now found. If we’ve strayed, we’re invited onto His broad and strong shoulders.

As followers of Christ, we live on the Easter-side of a dark cave where one called Jesus was buried in haste as Passover fell, victim of HIS pursuers – and we see the full impact of this psalm. When death has pursued us, our Bedouin Host takes us into “the house of the Lord forever”: forever because not even death stops the shepherding of the Good Shepherd who laid down His life so that He might save us. Surely goodness and kindness shall follow us all the days of our lives—and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen. (adapted from Stanford Lucyk, HOMILY SERVICE, April 1997, Vol 30, #1, p. 33)

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