



North Shore  
Congregational  
Church  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

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**“Shepherded”**  
**Rev. Julie Sheridan-Smith – Preaching**  
***Ezekiel 34: 1-6, 11-15, John 10:1-11***  
***May 10, 2020***

This is not at all how today was supposed to be. I imagine these are words or ideas we have often thought or said these recent months. This is not what we had planned for today.

And that is true. For instance, today, as I hope you know, is Mother’s Day. And for many many years, long before I started working here as a Mother with 3 children in our Sunday school--- we have practiced a musical which the children performed on Mother’s Day. And usually the older children would be ushers and greeters, and some would play prelude and offertory pieces that day.

The children, through the theme of the chosen musical, preached. And as I am sure you understand this was not possible this year...although we *are* grateful that Rick arranged to have some of the Krueger family here- representing children and parents of the church with the music they offer!

And so this Sunday I am *so* aware of *missing* the presence of people in the Sanctuary, especially the children and their families, even though I know many are “here” with us, just differently.

And so, again as it was a few weeks ago, it is the children that have led me toward the scripture for today bringing Good Shepherd images and readings to mind...

The “kidsmessage” last week focused on teaching the Good Shepherd lesson. I tried to explain why Jesus called *himself* the Good Shepherd, and talked about the idea that Jesus *wants* us to have a good life, to be taken care of. To know him and be led by him. And I admitted that since we don’t see Jesus walking around leading sheep around our neighborhood today, that it may be hard to understand this lesson. So, I suggested to the children that since we cannot see him in that way, God gave us people like mothers, parents, nurses, and teachers to help us see and have the good life God wants for us. And ways we are taken care of, loved and led in the way Jesus means for us.

So today, on Mother’s Day we have an expanded kidmessage. ☺

Our opening Psalm is beloved and so well known to many of us, that image of God, the Shepherd comforting through the darkest of times. Green pastures and still waters that sustain and goodness and mercy *being* ours always.

And the passage from Ezekiel that Marty read earlier, clearly inspired the author of John's gospel with the image of Jesus we heard. Ezekiel wrote so long ago to a people exiled in Babylon, devastated by what had happened to them. The prophet speaks of their way of life utterly changed, turned upside down, independence, means, and identity seeming to crumble before them.

Yet also of God's *intention* to renew and transform them into a people who care for those weaker and in need, into a people who raise the spirits of those despairing, and to *be* creators of peace. And central to this, Ezekiel casts the images of false shepherds and a true shepherd, God, who will gather them back together again to fulfill this purpose.

And yes then we offered this very image in Jesus as The Good Shepherd.

The Church, or the people to whom the author of John's gospel was originally writing, were a people displaced in a way within their own setting or culture, living amongst but somehow isolated from their origins.

And I suggest the situation those people's that Ezekiel spoke to so long ago as well as the situation of the faith community that John's gospel spoke into have something to say to our current life and evolving culture.

And the purpose and desire of this Good Shepherd? We heard it near the end of the reading. It is that we may have life, and have it abundantly! What does that look like? I fear we may have misinterpreted that in many ways, assuming abundance to mean alot, many things, more and more stuff, more saving and security.

The Psalm gives a verdant picture of abundance; a lush and life giving natural environment, inner confidence and peace. And what is the lasting thing the psalmist possesses? Goodness, Mercy and God.

And Jesus in John's gospel speaks of these things.

But what does that mean in everyday life? It is kind of like Thomas from a few weeks ago; when Jesus said to the disciples, "you know the way..." and Thomas said, "but we don't know, how can we know?" Jesus says the sheep will know his voice...and again, *they* didn't know how they would be able to know this? And these are realistic questions we would probably ask if we were there.

I mean this puts a lot of pressure on us regular people doesn't it? Let's face it, we are fallible. We are human. We get distracted and discouraged don't we?

And at times I wonder if we long for a God who feels like the sheep *dog*, running around barking and nipping at our heels trying to get us to pull together, ...to move toward safety or life-giving sustenance. But of course God doesn't force anything on us, God invites. Which then reminds us that we have *something* to do with it all. We are given the opportunity to wander and graze at will, but if we choose to follow...

Perhaps that *is why* the image of a shepherd that Jesus speaks of is good and applicable for us now. Apparently in the Middle East shepherds did not push and prod from behind the flock, they led from the front, calling out as Jesus describes.

And it does seem as if Jesus is pretty confident that we *will* follow and be led to abundant life. But what *is* that?

If we take our cue from the breadth of scripture, abundant life *is* found in caring for those weaker and in need. Abundant life is found in being a people who raise the spirits of those despairing. Abundant life is being creators of peace. And who does *that* look like to you?

So what's the problem? The problem is, when we think there's something about Jesus' abundant life that is only for *us*, only for some. Because that's when it becomes the *kind of abundance* that is centered on things we worry we don't have enough of; such as possessions, or false security... And this is where we come to the metaphor of thieves and bandits wanting our stuff, our resources, our security as divisive action that looks like pointing fingers and taking sides. And this *limited* sense of abundance causes us to turn away from others.

But clearly *that* cannot be the way of Jesus - to pit one group against another. To find some people more worthy than others.

But there *is* a universal thief we are all experiencing, worldwide. A shared sense of loss, and a shared sense of grieving those losses. And yet, this can bring us to a sense of unity and humility as well. Which this takes us right back to the Good Shepherd's way worth following, and the promise and purpose in abundant life we are offered.

Like children, we may wonder about the Good Shepherd, because we don't *see* Jesus today, at least not like we imagine; sandals, long hair, ragged clothes, kind face...in fact today that might be more about an image we attribute to the untrustworthy stranger.

But who *acts* like the Good Shepherd? Well, like the children - we see this around us every day in the way of mothers, parents, nurses, teachers, neighbors. Those who long for and offer goodness and mercy, the very *stuff* of abundant life.

Last week Marty suggested that we are in a wilderness time now, and that it can be a good and transformative time for us all. And I agree, I see us leaning toward God and each other more fully.

And perhaps in this way we are getting clearer glimpses of the abundant life that Jesus is talking about because that's the one we are longing for.

I see it and I am hearing about it from you. This week in particular I have heard people mention ways they have felt cared for, things that they are grateful for. And honestly it is almost as if they are quoting each other. For at the end of whatever situation they are speaking of they say - "it's the little things really that made such a difference to me." Or "I find myself reaching out - reconnecting and having conversations, that a few months ago I didn't have time for...or at least didn't think I had time for."

What if the abundant life that is promised, is what we are actually experiencing *now* in those "little things," those intentional connections? What if the shared loss we are all feeling has open-ended our desire for the re-aligning that Ezekiel spoke of. And then... we are *universally* a people who care for those weaker and in need, a people who raise the spirits of those despairing, and where we are a people who create of peace.

May this abundant life be ours,  
Amen.