

The Shepherd

Homily: Fourth Sunday of Easter 2020
Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 2:20b-25; John 10:27-30

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! Some years ago, while serving as pastor at St. Mary of the Valley in Monroe, I received a gift from a friend. It was a picture of a cowboy on a horse facing into the wind with snow. With rope and gun slung on the side of his horse, the cowboy is shown riding against the wind with snow falling about him. Interestingly, its title is “The Shepherd.” It seemed like such an appropriate gift at the time. The parish was a bit more rural when I was there and while most of the parishioners lived in the town of Monroe, I also had flock scattered over 500 square miles up the Skykomish River.

Although I went on to serve three very compact parishes in the heart of Seattle’s urban core, I’ve kept that picture as I moved around – first as auxiliary bishop in Seattle and now as bishop of Yakima. The picture reminded me not only of the real shepherds I occasionally met while serving as pastor, the picture, itself spoke to the rigors of the life. Shepherding involves long hours and horrible climates. The rope, the gun, even the turned head of the cowboy suggests constant vigilance for the flock.

This is, in fact, what John the evangelist records about Jesus. This tenth chapter from St. John’s Gospel begins with these words of warning: “Whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate, but whoever climbs over elsewhere, is a thief and a robber.” This is why – as noted a few lines later in today’s Gospel – Jesus can thus say, “My sheep hear my voice and follow me.” This is not a Jesus the shepherd found in so much tacky religious art: spotless white robe with a gentle little lamb. No, like the cowboy-shepherd, this Jesus has his ear cocked protectively, listening for danger.

Even the phrase “Besides restful waters he leads me…” taken from today’s Psalm 23 – some of the most loved words of scripture – refer to danger. Shepherds lead sheep to still waters, because roaring waters contain danger. Rapid water will get the sheep’s wool wet, exposing the weakest among them to the danger of drowning.

That particular image from Psalm 23 might speak to us now in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Good Shepherd is aware of how he leads the entire flock with particular attention for the weakest. In a certain sense that is what we have been doing during this time of our “Stay Home – Stay Healthy” initiative from the governor. Certainly, we do not want to expose the elderly and those with certain health conditions to a virus given their higher mortality rates. Even young people, like Fr. Alex Trejo in Mattawa, endured life-threatening symptoms from COVID-19 and he is not yet 50! Yet we also know that so many cannot make a living off their laptops and face grave economic dangers. How will we be attentive to this part of the flock? Indeed, last week Pope Francis insightfully asked us whether we will be disposed to change our own lifestyles so that those pushed into poverty as a result of the shutdowns will have an equitable share of our resources so that they can live their human dignity.

Pope Francis went on to note the many heroes of this pandemic. Those who work in our fields and orchards, our fruit warehouses and meat packing plants, our long distant truckers, and local food distributors, the clerks in grocery stores and the mini-marts of gasoline stations. The many nurses,

doctors and medical specialists serving at considerable fatigue. I would add here the many hospital administrators trying to make their health care pencil out when their hospitals were already financially fragile prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

Walking with the flock in my care as bishop, I cannot help but recall a conversation I had with one of our school moms. Family finances are fragile. The children are home. She is working with the school learning packets that were sent home. A dedicated volunteer at the school when not working, she's missing her own adult friends. Her children miss their friends. Yet in spite of the stress she finds herself grateful for the extra learning time. The school packets were a kind of planned back-fire on the ranch, diverting her attention from her own anxieties and fears. Her children were a gift precisely because they pulled her out of herself and her own interior ruminations.

Taken together, this Psalm 23 that we always pray this Fourth Sunday of Lent brings together the elements of nature in which the real shepherds work, with the interior compass that God gives us in his Son Jesus to guide us from the valley of death towards the still waters of life. My thanks to all of you watching today. Thank you for your generosity to the Church. Thank you for your attentiveness to the essential jobs you must do. Thank you for the way you imitate Jesus the Good Shepherd as you walk with your families during this time of pandemic.

Permit me to close with Psalm 23, hoping that these words will comfort and guide you in the days ahead.

*The Lord is my shepherd;
there is nothing I shall want.
Fresh and green are the pastures
where he gives me repose.
Near restful waters he leads me,
To revive my drooping spirit.*

*He guides me along the right path;
he is true to his name.
If I should walk in the valley of darkness
no evil should I fear.
You are there with your crook and your staff;
to give me comfort.*

*You have prepared a banquet for me
in the sight of my foes.
My head you have anointed with oil;
my cup is overflowing.*

*Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me
all the days of my life.
In the Lord's own house shall I dwell,
for ever and ever.*