

May 3, 2020
Fourth Sunday of Easter

Eighth Sunday of Livestream worship

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Psalm 23
John 10:10-18

Acts 2:42-47



Pando, in the Wasatch Plateau on the Fish Lake Highway in Southern Utah

Why We Need a Good Shepherd – Now!

The second reading this morning is from the book of Acts, chapter 2. It's after Easter; Jesus has been raised. He has appeared at least 13 times in 40 days and *breathed his Holy Spirit upon them*,ⁱ and has given them authority to continue his work on Earth. He commissioned them:

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”ⁱⁱ

Another time he tells them:

“Go...and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a vivid scene in Acts, chapter 1. The risen Christ ascends to Heaven before their eyes.

And then in chapter 2 the Holy Spirit descends and *tongues of fire* rest upon a large group of believers. Peter, the one who denied him, speaks to the crowd with power and authority, and thousands of people believe in Jesus, the Messiah.

Right after that comes this splendid picture of the life of those believers. Listen. This is Acts, chapter 2, beginning at verse 42:

They [that is, the believers] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Some say it never happened, that the community of faith described here in Acts 2 is impossibly idealized, romantic, and unrealistic. But I am not convinced.

In fact, history shows that one of the major reasons that Christianity, what was then called “The Way” of Jesus, spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire and was exactly this – the believers did precisely the kinds of things described here – they cared deeply for each other, and for their neighbors.

They would sell what they owned in order to give to the poor. They prayed every day in the temple, together *with glad and generous hearts*. And they shared...these believers gave...they sacrificed and served in exactly the way Luke described.

And every day the Lord added to their number.

They didn’t have a detailed plan for evangelism. Instead, they simply imitated Jesus. They did the things he did. They duplicated his sacrifice and his compassion.

And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

In the last few months, Baylor University professor Rodney Stark’s 1997 history of the early Christian church called *The Rise of Christianity*^{iv} has been getting a lot of attention, because in it Stark describes the way the early Christians handled their version of COVID-19.

In the first 200 years after Jesus rose there were two devastating epidemics: one thought to be smallpox and the other measles. The diseases were brought from overseas, killing as many as a third of the population in some areas, and devastating the Roman army. Twenty-three years before COVID, Dr. Stark, who is a sociologist and historian, not a Christian writer, did a deep dive into what happened in the early Christian community during the pandemic years.

He discovered that the infant church survived and thrived even during the pandemics for three reasons.

First, the Christians actually did sacrifice to help victims, just like the Bible says. Many became healthcare workers, providing outstanding care. This work garnered them the respect and appreciation of their neighbors.

Second, their vibrant faith and strong community made them more resilient. Here’s a surprise... they survived infection better than non-believers. Some people took this to be a miracle. But Cyprian, the bishop of North Africa, wrote that he believed their extraordinary survival rate was because “they had learned not to fear death.”^v

Third, the polytheism that was the official religion of the Roman Empire had begun to collapse during the pandemics. The stigma of belonging to “The Way” of Jesus began to fall away ...

And every day the Lord added to their number...

It also had to do with good leadership. Today is Good Shepherd Sunday on the church calendar. All the passages speak to Jesus' role as Shepherd— he is our protector, provider, leader, helper, and guide.

Jacob read us a few verses from John, chapter 10. If you can, read all of chapter 10 sometime today. You'll discover that John very much wanted us to understand that Jesus is the Good Shepherd that God promised Israel long ago.

Now we don't have many shepherds in Severna Park. There are a few; you'll see some of them in the video in a few minutes. We don't keep sheep but we know the poetry, and we cherish it. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want* is one of the most precious beliefs of Christianity and Judaism.

We also mostly understand that in ancient times "shepherd" was a symbol for leader. The king was called a shepherd. All through the Hebrew scriptures good and bad shepherds arise – mostly bad – bad shepherds are kings and other leaders who trample on the poor in their quest for wealth and power.

Bad shepherds feed themselves instead of the sheep; they fail to protect the vulnerable. They do not go after the lost and strayed. They rule with calculated self-interest rather than wisdom, kindness, and mercy.^{vi}

In the face of so much poor leadership, God speaks to Israel through the prophets, promising to send a good shepherd who will heal the sick, and strengthen the weak, and comfort the sorrowing. While you are reading the Bible today, look at Ezekiel, chapter 34. The whole chapter is a beautiful commentary on the 23rd Psalm.

In verse 11 the prophet Ezekiel reveals that God is the Good Shepherd, the One who is coming to right all wrongs and restore prosperity. The Good Shepherd insists that every member of the flock is safe and has enough food, *green pastures*.

Jesus and his followers would have heard Ezekiel 34 read in the temple dozens of times. They would have remembered Ezekiel's prophecy. They would have sung the 23rd Psalm as a hymn.

When Jesus said bad shepherd leaders are thieves and hired hands, they knew he was talking about self-serving leaders. Then he said:

*I am the good shepherd.
I know my own and my own know me ...
I lay down my life for the sheep.*

That is exactly what his church did in the early days. Those believers put their own lives on the line to serve as healthcare workers. They fed the widows and orphans. They gave what they could spare, and more than they could spare. They laid it all down of their own accord, stepping into the shoes of Jesus -- the Good Shepherd.

That's how it came to be that:

Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Not because of their cool media, or their excellent programs; not because the preaching was good, but because they cared. Instead of allowing fear to grip them, instead of turning on one another, they kept their eyes firmly fixed on the Good Shepherd.

That's our heritage, folks. So how should the church in 2020 respond to the swirling anxiety around us? How should we approach our family conversations and our national conversations? How should we think about our finances?

(1) Always first, we need to do what they did, we need to pray. Always pray.

(2) And share. We ought to *have all things in common* the way the first Christians did. That means more than sharing your lawnmower with your neighbor. It also means sharing your heart. Be honest with yourself and with others. Integrity and transparency are particularly important when we are distanced. So write to those who can't use the phone or Facetime. Don't pass over opportunities to gather virtually – Mother's Day is coming up. Connect with a new mom or a lady who has been like a mother to you. As Paul said:

Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.^{vii}

(3) And give. Everyone has something to give. This ordeal is teaching us how little things matter. Take what you would have spent going to a sporting event, a concert, or trip, and donate -- use it to further God's work. Help someone who is without shelter, or someone who doesn't have a job.

And remember, Woods has help available if you are struggling financially. We have an emergency fund at Woods called the Cecelia McKay Fund.

Pray. Share. Give.

(4) And praise and worship God. Just because we can't be in the building doesn't mean we can't worship. Don't give into the temptation to passively watch the service as if it were a TV show. Worship! Really participate; get into it-- pray, and sing, and worship!

We belong to the Good Shepherd, therefore we are a people of hope. So...

(5) Live and breathe your hope. *There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus* -- not the cancellation of our ceremonies and plans, not quarantine, not COVID, *not even death can separate us.*

We have a Good, good Shepherd. You are part of him. Whether you know it or not, you are a part of his body on Earth.

When Christ ascended to the Father, he commissioned his church to step into his place as Good Shepherd to the world. It is a sacred trust – a stewardship of all that God has made. The Good

Shepherd is gone, but not forgotten because he commissioned his church to do the things he did, while he was on Earth: heal, feed, teach, save.

It is similar to the way God put the first humans in charge of creation. God also planned for the church to be guardian and protector of the world that God so loves.

This came home to me in a powerful way when I read John Cobb's essay, about a tree, a real tree – a Quaking Aspen in Fish Lake, Utah that is also a symbol for us – of both our challenge and our opportunity.

Here's what Cobb wrote:

“There are aspens in southern Utah that spread over a hundred acres. What appears to be a massive grove of aspens, is, in fact, a single tree – genetically identical, sharing a single root system. All of what appears to be separate trees is in fact one organism. When any part of the organism needs nourishment, the other parts come to its aid.”



It's named Pando, Latin for “I spread.” Pando, it turns out, is the largest and oldest organism in the world. Have you seen it? I haven't but I sure want to! What beauty and strength.



In 2014 Cobb wrote:

“Its unity has allowed [Pando] to survive radical changes and immense destruction.”^{viii}

Today, the tree, which is 80,000 years old, and weighs 6,000 metric tons is dying. Development, drought, grazing, and fire suppression are thought to be the causes. Is it too late? I hope not. Please, God, I hope it's not too late.

Pando needs a Good Shepherd.

Now, I'm not a botanist, but here's something that has occurred to me. From a theological point of view, Pando is not the largest living organism on Earth – the Church is...the Church of Jesus Christ has as many branches as Pando has trunks.^{ix} Each branch has its own life, but we all share the same DNA. And more to the point, we all have the same Good Shepherd.

Jesus said:

There is one flock, one shepherd.

Today some say that the church is dying – the church in the West, that is. And it could be true. Critics point to the fact that pre-COVID worship attendance was down dramatically, and tens of thousands of American churches close every year.

But they have never seen us in a pandemic. Have they? Those predicting the death of “The Way” of Jesus don’t know how we can sacrifice to support the sick and unemployed...how we can lift up our healthcare workers. They don’t know how resilient we are, and how courageous. I don’t even think we know that ourselves! We’ve never been through anything like this.

Generosity, strength, service, resilience, and courage -- those are all in our DNA. We come from faithful, generous people. We don’t know what we are in for here, but whatever it is we know that we have a good, Good Shepherd.

We follow the One who knows the way out of the grave! We will rise!

Amen? In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ John 20:22

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 29:19-21

^{iv} Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, HarperCollins, 1997, chapter 4

^v *ibid*

^{vi} Kimberly Bracken Long, “The Shepherd Jesus” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2006, 51

^{vii} Romans 12:15

^{viii} John B. Cobb, Jr. “One More Thing before I Go” <https://denverclimatestudygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ONE-MORE-THING-BEFORE-I-GO-by-John-B.-Cobb-Jr..pdf>

^{ix} Rachel Held Evans makes this point in her wonderful book, *Search for Sunday*,