

“Training Our Trust”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
May 3, 2020
E-worship @ 10:30 am

Acts 2:42-47
John 10:1-10

In today’s gospel passage, Jesus compares himself to a good shepherd. I have to admit my experience with shepherds is limited at best. I believe the only encounter I ever had with a shepherd was when I was on a college study trip to Jordan. I went to Agnes Scott College, a women’s college. My study trip to Jordan stayed at a women’s university in Amman-- an urban school, filled with women who had come from all over the Arab world, as you could tell in their varied styles of dress. And surely all had some means or privilege, to get to spend 4 years, more or less, sequestered in this ivory tower. The campus had a wall around the campus that cut off the school from the busy streets, which was lovely because after classes were done for the day, and all the male faculty and staff had left, the women students would remove their modest head coverings and veils and play music in the campus plaza, as the quad transformed into a jubilant dance party.

I noticed while I was staying there that one section of the campus did not have a wall around it. This side of campus was bordered by large boulders, and I climbed one of them-- and there on the other side I saw two shepherd boys. They still had the roundness of youth, and their cheeks were rosy from the sun and the wind. I could hear them calling out to the sheep-- since I only know a couple words of Arabic, I am not sure whether they were saying words to their herd, or if their sounds were a private language they only shared with their flock. One of the boys, perched on a rock, casually reached out and rested an arm on the sheep’s course wool as the sheep tugged at the dried grasses beneath the boulders, and I could see that there was a comfortable intimacy and trust between them-- the sheep surely counting on the boys to soon lead them back to wherever they would find water and safe rest, as the day had almost ended.

“As-salamu alaykum” I called out to the boys. “Wa Alaikum Assalam,” they called back to me. Though they were probably wondering who this stranger, a foreigner, was calling to them, the rules of hospitality-- which are so deep in the Arab and Muslim world-- required that when I tell them, “Peace be upon you,” they call back, “And unto you, peace.” And with that, the older of the two boys clicked his tongue and they and the sheep were on their way to rest.

I could go on and on about the gateways in the story I just told: In addition to the physical gate of the walled-off university, there were the invisible ones too: the gateway between the privileged, mostly wealthy, students, and the humble shepherd boys. The gateway between the freedoms enjoyed by men in Amman society, and those lived by women; even their head

coverings served as a gateway of modesty between their bodies and the world. And as I stood on those boulders, I recognized the gateway of language, as I struggled even to find the words for a proper greeting, and the gateway of privilege I brought with me, a white foreigner who had the access to time, money, and education so that I could travel to that place in the world.

In a world with so many gateways, we notice things: is the grass greener on the other side of the fence? Are we safer on the inside, or are we safer on the outside? Very concretely, as NJ starts to open the gates bit by bit and allow for more freedom as long as COVID-19 cases are on the decline, we have to sort out the voices and figure out who to trust: who are the Shepherds, and who are the voices of the thieves and bandits, who seek to kill and destroy? I suspect that for many of us, it will take some time before we are in a place again where we can trust: trust nature, trust our own bodies-- (who among you has had a point when you panicked, wondering, "is that cough allergies or am I getting The Virus?"), trust our government officials, trust our neighbors.

But we can and we must trust God. We can also trust in Jesus, our Good Shepherd. Why? Because he calls us by our own names. We are not strangers to him, nor he to us. Like the shepherd boy in Amman whose care of a sheep allowed him to rest his hand on the animal's wool without the creature even flinching, God's hand is on us, and in a way we need not fear, but that we can trust, for this touch reveals God's love and care for us.

The gospel says that Jesus himself is the gateway. Now normally, we think of how much gates keep some in and others out. They maintain exclusivity. But with Jesus using his body as a gate, it is so much more an opening than it is a seal. "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." Now I know our brains have a bias that makes us create a negative implication of this passage thinking, "those who enter by Jesus will be saved, therefore those who do not enter by Jesus will be doomed." But the passage does not say that. I cannot believe that my salvation comes at the expense of someone else's damnation. There is nothing but invitation in this passage.

The gate is also not a trap. We can come in, and find salvation-- but we can also go out, and find the freedom to pasture. I know that with the realities of this pandemic, we feel like we have to make an awful choice between our freedom and our safety, as well as that of our community. And so far, it has been the responsible and ethical choice to give up many of our freedoms so that more people can be safe. But in the realm of God, we spiritually get to have both: freedom, and salvation, with Jesus at the gate, loving us whichever direction we go.

I know we will get to the time when we can have our safety and our freedom at the same time once again. But I hope we will not forget one of the most important lessons of this pandemic: when we are willing to step back and live more simply, more people can have life.

Our commitment to social distancing has been a radical sharing that has literally saved thousands if not millions of lives. It fills me with awe, what we have been able to do for one

another. I know it has not been easy, particularly for those who have struggled with financial instability or mental illness during this time-- and of course, there are those who still suffered physical illness, grief and death even with social distancing in place, and this suffering goes on. The church will have its work cut out for us, to mend broken hearts, to support the poor, and to lead the community into building trust again.

But I know the church has done this before. In Acts, we see a radical commitment to community. "Awe came upon everyone." When I read this verse with our bible study yesterday, one person had a different translation that said, "Fear came upon everyone." Those two words land differently with me. Both imply respect. Fear seems to expect the worst. Awe seems to carry with it wonder, hope, and wow! My hope is that in these next weeks and months, we can move from fear, to awe. If we can recognize each person as a gateway that can lead us closer to Jesus, we might be able to muster up more of that awe, and cast away fear-- even as we respect the power of this pandemic..

For weeks and months now, we have been carefully planning out our grocery trips and orders, and measuring out what we eat so that our groceries can last for our individual households. Think then of how extravagant it sounds that the early church devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread, prayer, and they sold all their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. Again the passage mentions that they broke bread and shared food "with glad and generous hearts."

There is something here about breaking bread, that tells me that is a kind of Jesus gateway. Jesus did say, after all, "I am the bread of life." In the communion meal, we remember the bread as his body, and the cup as his blood. As we take these elements, we then are called to live as the body and blood of Christ. The gateway to Christ is in each other. I see glimpses of this already, when I hear from a couple people each week who check in and say, "I'm going to the store. Does anyone need food?" Some of you have already given to Our Community Dinner Table and our Mission Committee will be considering a commitment to them soon. It is a program that has started up in Palisades Park, which partners with local restaurants that desperately need business during these times, to provide free meals to the community, no questions asked. All info goes out in English, Korean and Spanish. As you probably know, we have many neighbors who are undocumented. They will not be getting unemployment benefits. They won't be seeing a stimulus check. And those who do have the security of citizenship are suffering too. In the past two months, NJ's unemployment applications shot up from 55,000 to over 900,000. Last week, the New York Times reported that in NJ, which is the second wealthiest state in America, some food banks were reporting lines a mile long.

As Christians, our scriptures prepare us to be ready to share our bread. I certainly hope we have passed the worst medically of the impact of COVID-19. But the economic and social impact will go on and on, and when those of us with resources are asked to share with those who do not have, I hope the Spirit will lead us to share with "glad and generous hearts." In doing

so, we meet Christ at the gateway, and we enjoy salvation and at the same time, we are made more free-- free from greed, free from isolation, free from fear.

As we prepare to receive the meal Christ offers us now, may it train our trust to break and share bread, each time we do so finding a gateway to the salvation and the freedom Jesus offers.
Amen.