

Pastor Darby Lawrence
Fourth Sunday of Easter, 3 May 2020

St. Thomas Lutheran Church
Bloomington, Indiana

I'm sick and tired of feeling so claustrophobic. The walls feel like they're closing in on me. I'm also tired of being so on guard, like I'm prepared for battle or something. And when I do venture out on my walks with Oliver, I realize that my personal "space bubble" has gotten a LOT larger and the alarms that go off when even the slightest threat of someone violating my personal space are so loud that I think I've lost some hearing.

I've finally made the transition to feeling safe in my own home. When this first started I was wiping down things all the time. Then I'd have to wipe them down again, in case I got it wrong the first time. I used to work in restaurants and know all about cross-contamination! But I have to feel safe somewhere, so I decided that I would feel safe at home.

In the Old Testament grace and freedom and well-being are expressed spatially. In Psalm 121, for instance, it says "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forever more." For people who remember when they were slaves in Egypt and did not have the freedom to come in and go out freely, this was a big deal. To feel safe to go out and come back in – and to do so whenever you feel like it – means that you are safe wherever you go. Which is not how most of us feel now!

But in Psalm 22 (you know, the one we read on Maundy Thursday while stripping the altar, the one that directly precedes the beautiful Psalm 23), however, we get a different image:

*Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;*

and

*For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.*

...expressing a feeling of being trapped, of having nowhere to go and forces set to destroy me are closing in.

You see, I'm over 60 years old and I have asthma. As you know, I ride my bike as much as I can (I just got a new one!) and my lungs work most excellently, thank you very much! Except when they don't. So this puts me in the category of those who simply should not be around others right now. And I hate it. And I'm one of the lucky ones. I still have a job, I have food in the house and can get more if I want. I am not desperate....except that I am.

I have no right to complain...and yet I do. First world problems is what we would label my complaints. I'm so dang privileged...it's an insult to everyone who is seriously hard pressed by unemployment, being stuck with abusive people, sick and/or wondering what the future will bring.

And yet...and yet I still feel trapped, stuck, broken, anxious, angry, and just because others have it worse than you do does not mean that *you're* not going through a difficult time as well. It's not a contest; it's just a different sort of malaise. This thing that has changed the world is a virus that you cannot see and there is so much that we do not understand about how this virus actually works. So yeah. Stressful.

In today's gospel reading Jesus seems to be going to a lot of trouble to make a pretty simple point. And the point is this: He's going to take care of us. It's like he's giving us a different but more convoluted version of the 23rd Psalm. And the circumstances of the community he's writing to has everything to do with why he's trying to get this point across.

In the previous chapter we hear about Jesus healing a man born blind. Throughout the story we see how the blind man continues to "see" (i.e. understand) better who Jesus is and what the motives of the Jewish leaders really are. And we see how the Jewish leaders are blind to what's really going on here. I mean seriously. Jesus makes the blind see and they're all put out about him doing it on the wrong day. And, after having the best thing ever happen to him (being able to see AND knowing Jesus), he's driven out of the synagogue. Which is what was happening to those in John's community. The Jews who believed Jesus is the messiah were being rejected by the Jews who didn't. And being kicked out of the synagogue was like being excommunicated...on steroids. You were now shunned by family and friends. Your safety net has been removed. There was no Social Security and the government was not going to help you. Where was your home now? Who would care for you in time of trouble? You can see why the early church was known for their hospitality to each other (and those outside as well?): they kinda had to. They were all in the same boat so they had to work together so no one was left out.

There was an article a number of years ago in the Lutheran magazine entitled, "How the West Was Won." It had nothing to do with the wild west of the U.S. being won. Instead, it was about how the gospel moved west from Jerusalem, toward Rome. And the way that the west was won was through the striking hospitality of the early Christians. They would welcome the "wretched refuse" of society. Those who had been kicked out of their synagogues and homes, the sick and hungry. This extraordinary kindness and love made a real difference in peoples' lives. And it still does.

After the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and they were driven out of the synagogue, the house-church became the place of worship and Christian fellowship. And the thing that held them together was not a building or a particular place, but Jesus himself: the Word. It was in the breaking of the bread together and the sharing of the stories about him by various communities struggling with difficult situations. First, that Jesus was absent (at least in the normal way of understanding presence and absence) and second, they were being kicked out of their communities of faith. It was an existential crisis. They had to redefine their reality. Sort of like now.

What do we do with the longings for the way "things used to be," when we could gather together with other loved ones for food and fellowship, work and play, haircuts and dental work...for worship? What do we do when the future is so uncertain? What do we

do when there are all these “reports” that the world is falling apart – both our own lives *and* the whole way human civilization works? What do we do with all the insecurity, fear, anger, frustration and the whole array of unpleasant emotions that we battle every day?

I am the good shepherd, Jesus says. I will not abandon you when the wolves come. I will see that you are fed and watered. And I will lay down my life for you. And not only will you have life, you will have it abundantly. Green pastures and still waters might not sound like much to you, but to a sheep it sounds like heaven. I will lead you on the right path, and when the path you’re on is one that takes you through the valley of the shadow of death? Guess what? Jesus is with you so you don’t need to be afraid. He is armed with weapons to fight off the evil one and to corral you when you need to be corralled.

Jesus has prepared a feast for you and your cup is filled to the brim. Look around you! See the bounty! And what a community we are privileged to be a part of! Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life. Because God is with you. That’s right. Immanuel: God with us. That’s the promise.

Unlike other shepherds, other leaders, hired hands – who will run away when danger comes and who do not care about their sheep – Jesus promises to be here. With us. Wherever we go. Whether we worship in church or in our homes, Jesus is with us. And that’s a promise from Jesus himself. It doesn’t get any better than that.

This seems like forever. The fact that we *know* (don’t we?) that it won’t last forever doesn’t stop it from feeling that way. We want to feel at home again in this world that we once thought we knew. I want to feel less adrift, less afraid and less unsure about the future. Is that too much to ask, Jesus?

You see, there are two promises given in this gospel reading for today. The first is what Jesus says, which is, essentially – I’ve got you! I will care for you, I will be with you, no matter what.

But the second is this. You know my voice and you will follow me. You will receive and rejoice in the gift of abundant life that I give to you. In other words, You’ve got this! David Lose puts it this way:

Some may wonder if this confidence {that Jesus places in sheep and us) is misplaced. Jesus’ disciples – again, both then and now – have a history of falling short, of abandoning the way of discipleship when things are hard and slipping into a dangerous triumphalism when things are going well. True enough. But note, again, that this is less about the sheep’s innate or acquired abilities and far more about confidence in the relationship forged between the shepherd and his sheep.

This is Jesus’ version, I think, of “You’ve got this,” rooted in the prior, crucial affirmation, “I’ve got you.” And it feels like an important word, as Jesus makes a promise both about what he is doing for us – protecting, providing, caring, sacrificing, and giving life – and also a promise about how we’ll respond – trusting, listening, embracing, thriving.

Not just life, not just getting by, not mere existence, but an **abundant** life! No matter what. It's like the gift of peace that we share week by week. This peace is not bound to the circumstances of life – it's not like the fragile peace that the world offers, only to rip it out of our hands. No. This peace is rooted in Christ's victory over sin, death and the devil in his resurrection. This is the peace whose foundation is in the forgiveness of sins. This is the peace that comes from the promise that God is with us and will get us through. No. Matter. What. Even the valley of the shadow of death is no match for the Lord of Life.

David Lose again:

So perhaps this is just the time to say, "Jesus has us," followed quickly by "we'll get through!" This double-promise reminds me a bit of Paul's similarly bold affirmation in Romans 8. After asking "if God is for us, who can be against us?" he lists a lot of potential candidates – peril, famine, violence, and more. And the expansiveness of his list invites us to add, "disease, pandemic, quarantine, isolation...." All in order to ask, "will any of these things defeat us by separating us from God's love?" Which in turn sets up Paul's confidence-instilling and faith-creating declaration, "No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through the one who loves us!"

You've got this, folks! And you've got this because Jesus holds you in the palm of his hand. And that's some pretty good news!