Guided
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
May 3, 2020
Rev. Reebee Girash

Texts: Psalm 23, John 10:1-10
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Psalm 23
The Divine Shepherd
A Psalm of David.
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

John 10:1-10

10‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate
but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2 The one who enters by the
gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the
sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When
he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him
because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from
him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ 6 Jesus used this figure of
speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.
7 So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.
8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to
them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go
out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came
that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Prayer
Sermon

God who is our shepherd leads us to safety and abundance. Jesus our Good Shepherd, who is the one standing at the gate, indeed is the gate, guides us his sheep safely in and out, protects us, calls to us so that we will have life and have it abundantly. Jesus offers an invitation to all, for abundant life. And this is good news, that God wants for us green pastures, still waters, safety and protection, abundant life.

But this week I find myself caught by the thieves and bandits, by the enemies the psalmist fears. Once when I was in my 20s, a thief grabbed the money I’d extracted from an ATM. I wasn’t hurt, I didn’t even have to cancel my ATM card because he just wanted the cash. It was Christmas time and I made up a little story in my mind about the thief. I imagined that he had lost his job, he had small children at home and he was desperate to buy something to put under the tree. I refused to believe his motivation could have been simple greed, because I refused to think of my fellow humans that way.

Strange to say, I have noticed more thieves and bandits lurking lately. It is harder to imagine a good motive for zoombombers who target welcoming churches with messages of hate. It is harder to imagine any excuse scamming phishers might come up with to use a pandemic to convince church members to give Amazon credits. You know I am no fire and brimstone preacher but if I ever meet one of these nefarious people they will get a sermon from me. Even more dismaying, those who are trying to convince us that dollars outweigh human lives. There is a multiple siren calls right now - And I mean siren in the ancient mythological sense. We have hit the wearing, wearying, boring part of isolation. There is a siren call to have a dinner party, to go shopping. We are seeing all around us economic devastation caused by businesses being shuttered.
There is a siren call to reopen everything. We are seeing organizations of all sizes struggle to adapt to these strange times, wondering if they will survive this disaster. There is a siren call to institutional maintenance over serving our neighbors. And those are just the seemingly natural societal responses to an ongoing crisis of this scale. There are more nefarious bandits at work, who put bottom lines before safety - and hate groups organizing statehouse rallies. 1

In our text today, which by the way is about inviting people into safety and protecting people - not about excluding people - in our text today, “Jesus calls the authorities thieves and bandits because they claim what doesn’t belong to them. God has given the sheep to Jesus.” 2 “The Greek and Roman political tradition presents kings and emperors as “good shepherds” who foster a life marked by security and abundance for the empire’s subjects…[though Roman] structures actually brought sickness and poverty to most of [their] subjects,.” 3

There is always a siren calling us away from the protective enclosure of the Good Shepherd. There are always metaphorical thieves and bandits, and often we ourselves are our own worst enemy. In this moment in time, how do we know the voice of our Good Shepherd, the right gate to pass through? How can we discern the voice of one calling to safety, to hope, to abundant life? My mom gave me a tool that I rely upon for guidance, from her Methodist roots: the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Wesley described theological decision making as a table depending on four legs: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. In thinking about the best course for my family, our community, our congregation, our world in this moment:

-Scripture tells us to love our neighbor. Loving God and loving our neighbors are our highest moral call from scripture. Jesus prioritized the most vulnerable in his healing work.
-Our tradition in the UCC, and our UCC leaders have guided us in remaining out of our church buildings for a while longer as a means of loving our neighbors.
-Reason for me comes down to science. My mom was fond of saying that God gave us brains so science was a gift of God. I am looking to public health officials and scientists for guidance.
-Experience. I have a friend, B, who has struggled with bilateral pneumonia for weeks. Most of us know someone who has been gravely ill or died from this disease. In the month of April we lost more people than in the Vietnam War in total. So, the siren song of going back to a normal life? I invite you to join me in plugging your ears to it, for now. We will phase back into in-person gatherings, carefully.

How do we prioritize welcome and protection simultaneously? How do we re-open in safety and welcome newcomers and strangers? I don’t quite know -although in this online moment we’re seeing folks from hundreds of miles away and that tells me we’ll find a way. And Jesus who is the Good Shepherd and the gate, the guide and protector, might have a word for us. He walks with us through shadowy valleys, called us to flourish in precarious times. He has called us out by name, for the purpose of life and life abundant. Amen.

1 [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/far-right-coronavirus-prot...](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/far-right-coronavirus-protests-restrictions)
2 Scott Williamson, Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, Year A, Kindle edition.
3 <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4450>