From the window of a tour bus in Israel I watched Bedouin shepherds herding sheep by dog, horse, stick and the occasional motorcycle. There was little about it that was pastoral or idyllic. The terrain was brutal and unforgiving. With rocky hills, steep valleys, and a scattering of scrub brush, it was a bone-dry barren wasteland. (By the way, I’ve been to Israel twice; both times I saw Israelis choking-off access to water for Palestinians, and both times I thought we’re going to end up fighting wars over water….)

What struck me about the sheep herding was not the beauty but the danger.
The Bedouin shepherds shake a defiant fist in the face of the elements. They’re threatened by sun, wind, thirst and wild animals but they aren’t backing down. Everything seems close to the bone – mean and mangy. With few green pastures or cool still waters, they’re (literally) herding sheep in the valley of the shadow of death.

Now, there’s a plethora of passages, sermons, and songs about sheep and shepherds in the Christian tradition. The pictures of an airbrushed Jesus carrying a little lamb come to mind. But, I wonder if lost in those lyrical images are the dire straits of the desert. I wonder if what I saw out that tour bus window is closer to the spirit of scripture than the comfort of the tradition.

The sheep are burnt-dry-toast without the leading and protection of a shepherd. Gary Burge describes contemporary shepherders this way:

_To lead a flock through a desolate region with bandits and hungry animals is still serious business. Shepherds commonly carry a 4 or 5 foot wooden staff that serves chiefly as a defensive weapon. They are also skilled with sling and stones. When the flock is attacked a good shepherd will never throw a lamb to the attacking animals in order to save the flock. He tries to find a sheep pen and then stands (himself) between the flock and danger…. The desert is a desperate place._

So, Jesus on the edges of the desert offers up a familiar image…
I am the sheep-gate.  
I am the good shepherd. 
The sheep hear my voice. 
And, the original listeners would have heard something more to do with safety than with comfort. The image here is as much about the threats as it is about the security.

Last week I said (in an empty sanctuary) that wakes and funerals are a liminal space and right now even that space is ruptured. Richard Rohr expands or extends that idea. Listen to Rohr’s take:
Liminal space is an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where we can begin to think and act in new ways. It is where we are betwixt and between, having left one room or stage of life but not yet entered the next. We usually enter liminal space when our former way of being is challenged or changed—perhaps when we lose a job or a loved one, during illness, at the birth of a child, or a major relocation. It is a graced time, but often does not feel “graced” in any way. In such space, we are not certain or in control. This global pandemic we now face is an example of an immense, collective liminal space.

Dear friends, I wonder if it’s helpful to think of this time of “global pandemic” as a transitory time, a liminal space, to some changed reality. It is hard to believe that things will go back to “normal.” It is hard to believe that we won’t come out of this changed in some way.

Therefore…
even as it pulls back the illusion of comfort and control for so many,
even as it strips things down to the bone—sometimes mean and mangy,
even as it feels like the edge of the desert…
Is there also a chance to listen more intently for the Good Shepherd?
Is there also an opportunity to be “graced” in some way?
Is there also an awareness of life’s abundant fullness?

Consider our text…
Jesus says that he is both the sheep herder and the sheep gate. A herder is imaginable, but why a raggedy old gate swinging on a rusty hinge?

As I understand it, first century shepherds on the West Bank didn’t build pens or corrals with fencing and an operable gate. Rather, the sheep would be led into a cave or closed-off ravine to sleep at night and then the shepherd would lay down over the entryway. In order for the sheep to get out or a wolf to get in they would have to go over the body of the shepherd—the sheep gate.

Now, I don’t know if that’s exactly what Jesus had in mind, but on the edge of the desert, in uncertainty and danger, when whatever you believe about health and science and economics is largely a function of who you watch or read or listen to… the body of Jesus as protection is powerful image.

That is not to say that we won’t be bruised by a brutal landscape.
That is not to say that we won’t traverse the valley of the shadow of death.
That is not to say that cancer or economic collapse won’t have their day….

But, it is to say that ultimately, nothing, neither powers nor principalities nor pandemics, will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. You are ultimately and eternally safe. Nothing will snatch you from the fold of the Good Shepherd. Thanks be to God.
May that comfort, in life and in death, be sustaining for the living of these days.

Frederick Dale Bruner tells the story of a rural Palestinian family embroiled in the continuing conflict with Israel. The battle is over land, access to water, and encroaching settlements. It’s a daily struggle. In the chaos of that conflict the husband was killed, the family’s livestock was confiscated, and the widow was left in dire straits.
But, an all too typical story takes a colorful little twist here….

The woman went to inquire about the family’s animals. The sheep were being detained – sequestered with other sheep and goats. The woman pleaded for access. A very hesitant Israeli officer pointed to the pen containing hundreds of animals and quipped that it was impossible for her to call out her small flock from such a large herd. She asked the officer that if she could separate them herself, would he be willing to let her take her livestock. He agreed. A soldier opened the gate and the woman’s son produced a small reed flute. He played a simple tune again and again – and soon sheep heads begin popping up across the pen. The young boy continued to play and walked toward home, followed by the family flock of twenty-five sheep. Or, as John puts it:

...the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out....
He goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

The shepherd calls and the bleating sheep follow.

As those who belong, body and soul, to Jesus part of our calling is tuning our ears to hear the Shepherd’s reed flute. Part of our calling is learning to hear his call over all the other voices that squawk for our attention, bury us in noise, and keep telling us toxic lies. Part of our calling is learning to listen for the voice of the Shepherd.

I was recently asked if I’d added anything new to life while sheltering in place. Had I picked up any hobbies, checked any boxes on my bucket list, read The Brothers Karamazov? I sheepishly acknowledged that I hadn’t added anything. Time has been slower, and with that there’s more time to talk with Sandi, more time to read, and new rhythms and expectations for work…. And, the same is true for some of you. While you might have to navigate home schooling there is also the gift of a different quality of time with your children, or your spouse, or yourself. There is a certain slowness and stillness. There is time together.

The truth is, sheltering in place is a privilege.
While some are scrambling on the front lines, and some are crushed by financial fears and claustrophobia, and some face difficult-demanding-days-and-decisions as doctors, nurses, administrators, and some are simply lost in the uncertainty, it is a privilege to be on pause. In this liminal space how might we be changed?

I know that these are also worrisome and disappointing days when you’re readying for college, planning a wedding, expecting to travel, or anxious about money lasting, but in this time of uncertainty is there also a way to deconstruct something and reconstruct something else? To borrow a line from Alison Veenstra:

What will slip away for good, what new will rise, and how will the essentials of life be re-formed for each of us?
Dear friends, in this time can we listen anew for the way and will of Jesus? Can we tune our ears to his tune? Even when our communal/spiritual practices have been changed can we find new ways through prayer, meditation, scripture reading, longer slower conversations with loved ones, reading, to reimagine what it might mean to follow Jesus? What can we let go of, what can we hold onto, and what can we re-form? Maybe a simple first step is to ask for the Spirit’s leading in this liminal space.

And finally, this…
Jesus juxtaposes the dangers of sheep stealers with the promise of life in its fullness or abundance. He would be a shepherd that leads his flock into life.

That promise is clearly not about prosperity, or freedom from illness, or some pathway that skirts struggles with mental health, or addiction, or loneliness, or loss. The actual lives of Christians demonstrates otherwise. That promise does not somehow lift us up out of life’s disappointments or deaden our senses to the struggles of others. But…

But, what if it lets us live with the deep confidence that finally and fully we belong to the Shepherd and nothing will snatch us from his hand? And that, no matter how hard or harsh the journey, we are not left without guidance. We are not left without a way of being – spelled out in scripture, tradition, and guided by the Spirit. Those two gifts: the protection and guidance of the Shepherd seem to lead to a life of fullness. We would be diminished with anything less….

So, dear friends, while there will be danger, distractions and misleading voices. While there will be time of darkness and times of good light on the green pastures. There is also the promise and calling of the Good Shepherd – the one who lays down his life for this sheep.

There is nothing to fear.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.