

CONNECT! SUNDAY REFLECTION

4th Sunday of Easter | For Sunday, May 3, 2020

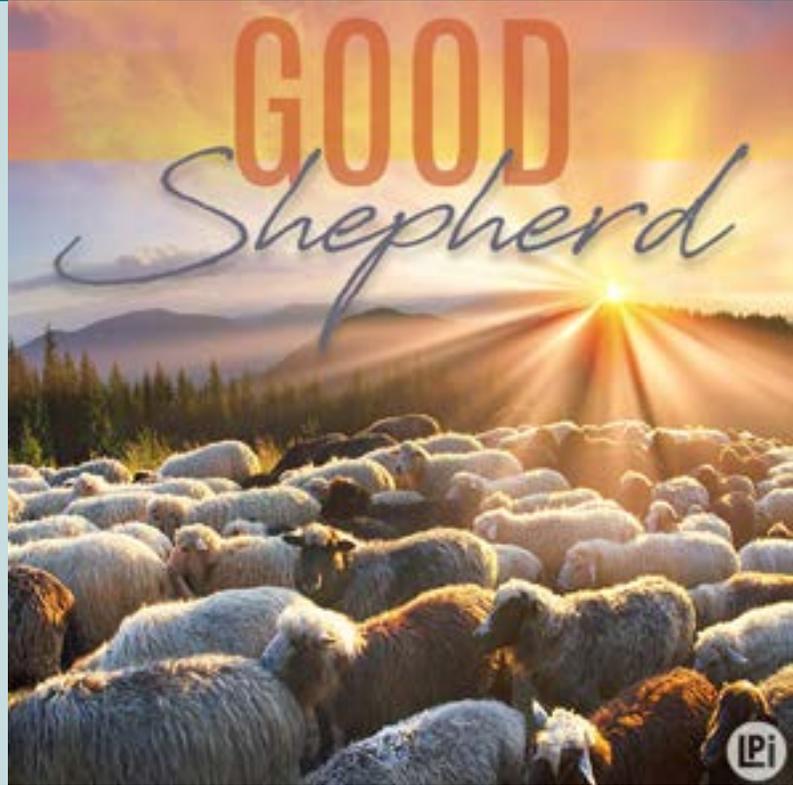
In the Midst of Hardship, Anxiety & Suffering

Written by Rev. Mark Suslenko

Acts 2:14A, 36-41

1 Peter 2:20B-25

John 10:1-10



Do you ever feel that life is unfair? Though we understand that injustice and inequity exist, there is an underlying assumption that if we believe in God, or better yet get God on our side, then the scales of justice and fairness will somehow be tipped in our favor. God will intervene to set things right. The image we often carry of God is one of an all-powerful and grand fixer. But, if we listen carefully to Sacred Scripture and study faith tradition, this is not who God is at all. Our second reading this weekend gives us a great perspective to pursue. "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps. *He committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth.*" If we look to the passion of Christ, we clearly see a God who does not eradicate or sidestep injustice and great suffering but embraces them. If the idea is to somehow get God to remove these painful stumbling blocks from our path, then we would have been given this as the example to follow. Instead, we have been brought through insults, unjust accusations, intense suffering, ridicule and death.

Jesus kept himself intact as he went along the path of the cross. It was this anchored integrity, rooted in a relentless relationship he had with his Father that kept him from anger, bitterness, retaliation, defensiveness, and self-pity. His strong resolution to endure this pain brought him to the place where all pain empties into, the Resurrection. The abundant life Jesus desires us to have is our resurrected life! It is not the promise of an easy meal ticket through this earthly one but the glory of transformation and new life to come. This is where the Good Shepherd's example leads us. It's not about finding green and safe pastures here. Believing in Jesus as the Good Shepherd isn't some form of spiritual "bubble wrap" we roll around ourselves to protect us from all of life's evils and hardships. This is nowhere near the idea. It certainly was not how the original disciples saw things and the way their lives played out didn't reflect a God who shielded them from all injury and harm. They encountered quite the opposite. But, they followed the example of their Good Shepherd.

Is your faith in God still strong in the midst of hardship, confusion, anxiety, and suffering? I think that there is a little child in all of us that secretly really wants God to make it all better. Sometimes, that little

child is so forward in our personality that God's response determines our level of faith. But, God is saying, "follow the example I gave you." Listen to Him. "This is my beloved Son!" We have a hard time with this, and we fight it tug and pull with God all the way! We beg and plead, look for magical prayers, say the right things, storm the doors of heaven, and exhaust ourselves in the process.

Can you love a God who leaves you with your suffering? "The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want." This means *nothing*. Nothing includes a resolution to my problem, an avoidance of pain and suffering, the sheltering of someone I love from hardship or death, a tipping of the scales in my favor or anything else we believe we may want. Nothing. My only desire is God and God alone. If I can find this treasure, a relationship with my Creator, the essence and truth of life, then that is ALL that I need. Let God take care of the rest and let it go.

That's what Jesus, our Good Shepherd, did. He let it go. After he pleaded with God in the garden, he let it go. He realized in the depth of his being that none of this was about his ego or self-preservation. It's not about us either and that's one of the hardest lessons of life to learn. It's not about us. It is about God and the fact that He lovingly chose to make each of us into the tremendously wonderful person we are, placing the very spark of His Divine Presence within us. All we need is God's presence. It is enough.

Suffering and hardship are not the enemy but encounters that can bring us deeper into the mystery and wonder of life and of God's presence. As we embrace every moment of suffering, work through every insult and injustice, find faith, hope, and love in every moment of life's blessing, we kiss the eternal resurrected presence and life that awaits us. We kiss God.

PRAYER

O Lord, You have searched me and You know me.
You know when I sit and when I stand.
You understand my thoughts from afar.
With all my ways You are familiar.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord,
You know the whole of it.
Where can I go from Your spirit?
From Your presence where can I flee?
Truly You have formed my inmost being.
You knit me in my mother's womb.
I give You thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made.
Wonderful are all your works.

In times of trial and uncertainty, Lord,
help me to place my trust in You and praise You.
When I cannot control what happens around me,
help me to know that all is in Your care.
May the celebration of the resurrection of your Son
show me that You bring new life out of the darkest
of life's moments!
May I have faith in Your life-giving Presence,
hope in Your promise for a brighter tomorrow,
and love so that I can serve You and my sisters
and brothers more fully.

Christ, the Good Shepherd, is risen. Amen. Alleluia!

(by Fr. Mark Suslenko, based on Psalm 139)

If we listen deeply and distance ourselves from all the conflicting and distracting voices, this is the Good Shepherd we desperately want to follow. We want ultimately to live and not die. The labor pains we must endure until we get to our eternal destiny are well worth the sacrifice. We will welcome new life just as parents welcome the birth of their child. Suddenly, for the mother who endured all the pains of birth, the experience that seemed relentless and never-ending recedes as the joy and love of birth are ushered in.

Jesus wants to keep us focused. It is too easy to get distracted by this world, as if all that is around us is what is of ultimate importance. It is not. If we pray to keep our focus on Christ and the example he gave us, our loving Good Shepherd will always keep us in his care and never let anyone distract us or lead us astray. If we allow ourselves to be distracted and lured by pastures that may at first appear greener, we can quickly lose our way.

The world struggles with our Good Shepherd. It makes no sense to some why we would believe and pledge our devotion to a God who asks us to accept suffering, injustice, hardship, and death. Coming to a place of acceptance of this does not involve a satisfaction of our minds but a relationship that satisfies our souls and the truth of who we are. Are you willing to leave ALL worldly cares, anxieties and worries behind and return to the true shepherd and guardian of your soul?

Rev. Mark Suslenko