

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

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Last week, my wife Alleyne and I were in Thailand visiting our younger daughter. We slept in Bangkok the first night, and then our plan was to travel north to Nakhon Sawan where our daughter lives and works as a fourth grade teacher.

Our daughter had assured us it would be easy to get to her, a four hour van ride, and she would meet us at the station when we arrived. But when we got to the Bangkok van station in the x Pl , it was full of beleaguered people who appeared to have been there for hours. There were no van tickets. A hot and treacherous walk across the busy highway to the bus station resulted in the same answer. No bus tickets either.

None of us had considered that it was a national holiday, Songkram, and that everyone in Thailand was going to be with family. We were trying to travel on the equivalent of the day before Thanksgiving.

We stood in the sweltering bus station considering our options. Should we try to get a taxi to take us the whole way? Should we just go back to the hotel and stay in Bangkok? Would there still be a room for us? What were we thinking, coming to another country with no plan? Would we be sleeping in this bus station, or in the street that night?

Whoever enters by me will be saved, says Jesus in today's Gospel, and will come in and go out and find pasture. This is Good Shepherd Sunday. And St Martin's, let me tell you, that day we definitely needed a shepherd!

Well, we did not have to sleep in the street. With the help of Facetime and the Grab app, the Uber of Thailand, we got to the train station and got a third class train ticket for that afternoon.

The train ride was an adventure. There was no air-conditioning. We sat on a long, old-school-style subway bench crowded in with other passengers. As the old cars rattled through the countryside, large bits of pollen and dust and smoke blew into the windows and through the train.

It was over 100 degrees out and the sun was beating down on us as we rolled along. We were the only non-Thai passengers in our train car.

Alleyne Googled the route, but only some of the stops were included in the map, leaving us unsure of exactly where we were. People would enter the cars selling things, everything from a bag of Thai iced tea to a full boxed dinner. At one point hours into the trip, having run out our water, I bought bags of some kind of colorful iced sweet drink.

Alleyne went back to the AI authorities, searching, Can tourists drink the water in Thailand? The answer was cautious and ambiguous. I on the other hand took my life into my hands and just drank it. Would I be horribly sick for the rest of the trip? Would I die a painful death? At that point we were so far out of our comfort zone that I just took the chance!

You will come in and go out and find pasture, Jesus says.

And wonder of wonders, I did not die or even get a little sick. Not only that, we actually reached Nakhon Sawan, four hot, dusty hours later, sweaty and with pretty sore butts, but we got there, got out at the right stop, and met up with our daughter and her friends. We checked into our hotel and went out to a restaurant we would have never found on our own, and had a delicious dinner.

Really, our whole trip was a miracle like that. We were totally out of our element, we knew nothing, and somehow, everything worked out. We went out and found pasture, guided by a lot of really good people, and by our Good Shepherd, Jesus.

Our daughter's friend who Facetimed with the ticket attendant in the train station. The elderly man on the train, who gestured to us to come over to the shade side of the car. The woman who knew enough English to ask, Where are you going? And then smiled even though we totally pronounced the name of the city wrong and she had no idea what we had said. They were all Jesus to us that day, they all helped shepherd us to the pasture of Nakhon Sawan and our daughter and her friends.

There were other things going on in the week we were in Thailand, much more difficult and disturbing things. Our President posting a meme of himself as Jesus. The Justice Department phoning Pope Leo and vaguely threatening him by mentioning "Avignon," invoking a time in history when the pope was exiled and a second pope installed. The ongoing war in the background of all of this.

How should we as Christians respond to these things? Are they just ridiculous, just distraction, or are they serious? If we make our own statement, are we adding to the nonsense? Are we being performative? Or are we required to respond, to show what the Church is about?

St Martin's, being a follower of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, being a Christian, is about boundaries. St Martin's, being a follower of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, being a Christian, is about freedom. Boundaries. And freedom. The gate, and the abundant life.

We as followers of Jesus make vows, to worship together, to tell the good news, to strive for justice and love our neighbor. We live within these boundaries, within these gates that guide our life. We come together through other gates, into a space like this, to remind ourselves of these things that bind us, to each other and to God. We come together through this gate into this space, and then we are sent out to be guided by that same shepherd, sent out to find pasture.

St Martin's, there are all kinds of voices out there asking for our attention. There is plenty of chaos, violence, and thievery. There are plenty of big and confusing and difficult things happening in our world. There are plenty of worries, about how we will get from here to there, and what the future brings.

And St Martin's, this is exactly why we come together. To center ourselves in the voice of our Good Shepherd. To discern together whether and how and when to respond to brokenness and injustice. To have the freedom to go out into completely unfamiliar places, the freedom to go forward without knowing the whole plan, because we know that we have a shepherd, a shepherd who will be with us and who will guide us to find pasture.

St Martin's, let us heed the words of our Good Shepherd. We have come together into this gate, which is Jesus, to be bound together as Christ's body. Let us go out from this place in freedom, following where Christ would have us go, however strange and uncertain it may be. We know there is pasture there. We know abundant life awaits us. Amen.