In just a few minutes I will play a video of a shepherd we all know within our parish. His name is Jerry Frazier, and Jerry raises Barbados Blackbelly sheep. You will hear in this video how all sheep are not the same, yet, all sheep must have a person who cares for them. Someone to give them water, feed them, and care for the new born lambs. There is a moment in the video where we will hear that a shepherd can also fail to keep the sheep safe, because as Jerry mentions sheep can also do ‘stupid’ things. I open our time together today with this video, so that we are under no illusions that the Gospel of John portrays a real Jesus who cares deeply about people.

Jerry shares with us that his role is to keep the sheep well cared for, and you may have noticed that the sheep recognize him, and come to him quickly. And, you may have also noticed how the sheep were afraid to come toward me because I was a stranger. It is unfortunate that the Lectionary takes up this shepherd story in verse 11 rather than verse 1, because we do miss a fuller picture of Jesus as a shepherd, a shepherd who tells his flock of followers that he can be trusted, and that there is no need to come through the back door to spend time with him. Rather, Jesus, informs his followers, I am the door, spending time with me is easy and all are welcome, even those sheep or people who do not know me yet.

The author of John shares these words from Jesus in the form of a parable, or a story designed to show how much Jesus cared for his new followers. John or a disciple of John wrote these words during a difficult time for both Jews and Jesus followers. No one really trusted anyone. The Jewish temple had been destroyed in 70 A.D., followers of Jesus were being persecuted, both by the Jewish leaders and by Romans, so chaos civil unrest ruled the day.

This week my thoughts have turned to this gospel reading as a place to find comfort. It is April 25th, 2021, and we have been meeting by zoom for one year and one month. I began to think of previous generations who lived in fear during the Black Plague of the 14th and 15th Century. 60% or 50 million people in Europe died of the plague in the 14th century. The plague took an emotional and spiritual tole on the people of Europe, and even through the 16th century people cowered in fear when they heard the word plague. People had no idea what really caused the plague, and not knowing lead to the spiritual leaders using fear as a manipulative tool for people to pay homage to the church.

Luther was not the first man to step forward to stand against the church leaders, but he certainly was the most prestigious. In 1523 Luther wrote these words in a sermon about what it meant for Jesus to be a shepherd in John 10. This is what Luther wrote, “*This is a comforting Gospel, which so beautifully portrays the Lord Jesus and teaches us what manner of person he is, what kind of works he does, and how he is disposed toward men … The Gospel of John, [Luther says], does not say, ‘Do this and do that, but rather: Come, I will show you where you may find and obtain what you need to make you godly. The gospels do not drive or threaten [us into submission], but tenderly invites us [to spend time with Jesus, the Shepherd].’*”

These words found in John, chapter 10 were meant for all people to find strength in a God who listens, who comforts, and who does not forsake any of his sheep. Jesus tells us plainly, “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the father.” Theologically, the passage is complex and deep, but today, I want us merely to feel the strength and comfort of this passage. Many of us have lost family members to Covid this past year. Jesus tells us, “Come, little children, come.” Friends close to us have died, and yet, their Celebrations of Life stay on hold. Parish members living in Assisted Living or Nursing Homes have been on lockdown for months, where they just opened the doors to family and friends. They have suffered in isolation as we have suffered not knowing for sure how they are coping. We, too, have not spent time with our friends or worshipped together. It’s been a hard time for all. Civil unrest and random shootings strike at the heart of our civilized or uncivilized nation right now, yet, Jesus beckons us to come to him.

Luther was a practical and bold man, and being a religious and pious man himself, he was bold to point fingers of injustice toward his fellow religious leaders. Luther says in his sermon, “*Christ's kingdom is to be concerned about the weak, the sick, the broken, that he may help them. That is, indeed, a comforting declaration. The only trouble is that we do not realize our needs and infirmities. If we realized them, we would soon flee to [Jesus]. But how did those shepherds act? The [religious leaders] ruled with rigor, and applied God's Law with great severity; and, moreover, they added their own commandments, as they still do, and when these were not fulfilled, they raved and condemned, so that they were driving and driving and exhorting and exacting, continually. That is no proper way to tend and keep souls, says Christ. He is no such shepherd as that; for no one is benefited, but is rather wholly undone, by such a course.*” These words by Luther are powerful!

We like to think we live in a progressive time, yet, when I hear the words of Luther, I hear two things, first, know yourself well enough to acknowledge your own emotional, physical and spiritual pain so you or I can give comfort to others. Second, lean into Jesus, our shepherd, and ask to be strengthened, as well as, comforted. Lean into these words from Psalm 23,

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures

and leads me beside still waters.

He revives my soul and guides me along right

pathways for his Name’s sake.

These words are to bring comfort to all God’s sheep, people, like ourselves, who call themselves Christians, and people who recognize the voice of the Shepherd. Jesus merely says, come. Amen.