

**Homily for May 3, 2020**  
**(Fourth Sunday of Easter – Cycle A)**  
**Father Patrick L. Connor**

We could well call today *Good Shepherd Sunday* especially in light of today's Gospel and today's Responsorial Psalm 23, the Good Shepherd Psalm. Before we plunge into the depths of the Gospel, let us probe the wisdom of the Psalm.

In the opening verses it speaks about how *The Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want because In verdant pastures he gives me repose*. That word 'verdant' may not be a part of our everyday talk. It means 'leafy, lush, luxuriant and overgrown'. In other words, if you were an animal who fed on grass from the field, such lush, leafy pasture would absolutely thrill you and you would be eating non-stop! You would be so satisfied you wouldn't have a care in the world!!

This place of a full-stomach also leads to repose, which means 'a state of resting after exertion or strain'. So the Psalm is saying that the Good Shepherd leads us through our hard labors and strain and hungers into a place where we can become well-fed in body, mind and soul, and find peace and rest and hope. Note there is more beyond the pasture, as He leads us *beside restful waters*, there to satisfy our thirst and let us sit in quiet and peace by the water. Then there is that beautiful phrase as we are sitting by the restful waters: *He refreshes my soul*. Stay with that thought a minute...Jesus refreshes my soul.

This phrase captures my experience of receiving Jesus in Holy Communion. That's what makes this time of suspending Public Masses so difficult for me as your pastor and shepherd...that the sheep of my flock who are hungering for the Bread of life are suffering the strain of isolation and separation during these days of the Corona Virus, and Our Lord only knows what others forms of suffering you are going through. You cannot partake of what I have the privilege of sharing in as I celebrate this Sacred Mystery for you who are only able to be here in spirit through Streaming.

**But the important thing is that you are here in spirit, and you do partake of this mystery because Jesus the Good Shepherd embraces you and leads you here to *green pastures and restful waters*. Jesus is with you right where you are to refresh your soul, to reward your faith and your love for Him.**

**You may not feel better. But don't live by feelings alone. Live by your faith. This is where the next verse of the Psalm is so important. It says: *He guides me in right paths for His Name's sake*. Take to heart those words *He guides me*. He does not leave you alone, even though you may feel alone. He is always with you. Never believe otherwise. The 'Father of Lies', Satan, would want you to believe that Jesus does not guide you. But do not believe that lie. Believe instead the Truth...the Living Word of God, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who guides you.**

**Now the Psalm brings us to an important reality of life. Life is not all feeling like we are on 'top of the world'...or a 'Ho-Ho-Ho!' type of experience. Rather, we can have days of 'Boo-Hoo-Hoo!' experiences described by the Psalm as going through the Dark Valley. It says, *Even though I walk in the Dark Valley, I fear no evil; for You are my side with Your rod and staff that give me courage*.**

**So the Psalm recognizes that 'Dark Valleys' are going to be a part of our life. Even Jesus embraced Dark Valleys in His Life. He knew fear, He saw evil. Some people may think because He was God, He was never afraid. St. Paul says He was *one like us in all things but sin*....meaning He had feeling like us. His Divinity did not take away His Humanity. Remember in His Agony in the Garden He sweat Blood, so anxious and afraid was He as He pondered His coming Passion and Death. He was in the Darkest Valley of His Life then. But He did not despair, because even when He prayed to His Father to *take this Cup away from Me*, He added, *Yet, not My Will, but Thy Will be done!* Then we are told an Angel from Heaven appeared to Him to strengthen Him.**

**Jesus experienced that even in His Darkest Valley He found courage in the midst of His fear, and it turned His fear into trust. That Angel represented His Father at His Side...*with Your rod and staff that give me courage*.**

**We, too, in our Darkest Valleys, though we may not be at the point of sweating blood like Jesus, might find ourselves manifesting our fear and anxiety in all sorts of ways. But our faith can suddenly intervene and we may see a Light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak. We may feel that this Dark**

Valley will not last forever...and we do sense that we are not alone, that Jesus is by our side with His *rod and staff that give me courage*.

Take a moment to get in touch with that courage within, for it is not so much based on you as it is based on Jesus who is within you. He knows the road ahead, and asks that you place your trust in Him.

We hear Jesus say in the Gospel how as the Good Shepherd He enters through the Gate, than call His sheep out and they hear His Voice and follow Him. When He has driven out all His own, He walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow Him, because they recognize His Voice. *Whoever enters through Me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.*

We seek abundant life. We seek the green pastures, the restful waters, the gentle Voice of Jesus calling us to follow Him through the Dark Valley into a place of repose where *He refreshes my soul*.

But yet, just as He commissioned His Apostles with the task of spreading the Good News of the Gospel as He was about to leave them and ascend into Heaven, which was not always an easy task, so too with us. Even in the midst of our struggles, we are to be mindful of other sheep in our midst, and how Jesus is calling them...sometimes through us...yes, through you. You are God's Instrument. Sometimes you are the only voice your neighbor or family member may be open to in talking about God...not in a 'Holier-Than-Thou' attitude, but showing the Love of God to that person first and foremost, which establishes a climate of trust, as Jesus did in His Ministry. Then, there may come a time for discussion when that person may ask the source of your own sense of peace and hope and courage in these difficult times.

This is when you can begin a conversation about how *The Lord is My Shepherd*.

I must confess that in this Gospel where Jesus talks about leading the sheep by walking ahead of them and calling them, I once heard a priest share about how when he visited the Holy Land he happened to visit a shepherd and his farm. He spent part of the day and happened to go out with the shepherd to gather the flock. Unlike Jesus, this shepherd walked behind the flock, and he would pick up small pebbles and toss it gently at the head of the lead sheep to direct it, tossing it to the right side of the head to make it go left or to the left

side of the head to make it go right. The flock would follow. Anyway, it worked. The point the priest made was as he looked down on the ground, he saw that he and the shepherd were walking in the manure left by the sheep as they passed this while they walked. The shepherd didn't mind...it was just a part of his world. Not a pretty sight, and rather smelly. This brought a lesson home to the priest. If you put Jesus in this picture, and we are the sheep, and Jesus is guiding us like this shepherd, Jesus is walking behind us, sharing in the messiness of our lives. That's exactly what He did by humbling Himself, and taking on our Humanity in all things but sin, even to the point of suffering death, death on a Cross for us.

Jesus loves us even with all the messiness of our lives...our faults, our struggles, even our sins. He doesn't give up on us even when we become like Lost Sheep. We may give up on ourselves...but not Him. Let us always return to the Image of the Good Shepherd, calling us by name to follow Him through the Dark Valley to *green pastures and still waters*...where He will give us repose, and someday, Eternal Life in His Glory!

