



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Soundtrack of Love

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 3, 2020  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Based on John 10:1-10*

*Life abundant, God of grace, you call us by name to live without fear: in peace may we resist all that diminishes and destroys your people, that their hearts might be turned to the only source of life; through Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Amen.*

As our Rector, Bishop Dean Wolfe, pointed out last week, the question for us during this unprecedented and challenging time may not be so much how will we be changed, but rather, what is being revealed about who we are?

One new, disturbing trend has emerged: an increase in the purchasing of guns and ammunition. Some gun dealers and online retailers have reported an uptick in sales, and stories abound of individuals motivated to buy their first gun in response to this pandemic. Journalists draw attention to quarantined children, antsy and bored, having increased access to potentially loaded and unlocked firearms. Victims of domestic violence, forced to shelter in place with their abusers, live in terror of the consequences of a dispute when there is a gun in the home.

The U.S. government has been pushing forward with its aggressive immigration enforcement agenda, refusing to release detained immigrants from centers where social distancing is impossible; there is inadequate access to soap, and the virus is rapidly spreading. Further, the administration intends to suspend immigration to the U.S. temporarily, in order to protect American workers both during this pause and once the economy begins to recover.

According to many health professionals, caution is being thrown to the wind in the rush to re-open the economy, the reported cost of which could easily be a higher death toll. This pandemic exposes the race- and class-based fault lines in Americans' physical health, financial health, and dignity of work, as evinced by disparities in access to health care, higher COVID-19 death rates, and inability to work remotely. People who are unsheltered understandably seek refuge in subway trains, only to be blamed for creating dangerous conditions for themselves and essential workers whose only affordable mode of transportation is public transit.

These realities are spun and sold as the practice of safety, but it's really the practice of fear. In these anxiety-producing and difficult times, there are many and quite discordant voices out there that seek to separate, discriminate, and foment division and fear; voices that take us away from a sense of belonging, from a sense of being beloved, from a sense of our better selves.

The soundtrack for much of the story of COVID-19 in America reverberates with sirens, the sobs of grieving families, the pleas of innocent victims. It's the soundtrack of fear. Fear is our newest neighbor, and it is revealing a lot about who we are.

In John's story about the good shepherd, fear is a familiar neighbor. John's community lived with the reality of retaliation and the threat of extinction. Their first-century Mediterranean world was a scary place. The persecutions were heating up, and the followers of Jesus were, in the eyes of Rome, just so many lambs for the lions. The Jesus movement was still new, struggling to define itself against the threat of Rome and the threat of competing philosophies and counter claims to truth.

So they told stories. Meeting under cover of darkness, hidden from the authorities, huddled in some secret spot, listening for the sound of Roman boots, they told stories to counter the fear. They told stories of heroes and hope, courage and comfort, that helped them to name who they were and to whom they belonged and whom they could trust.

They heard the story of the shepherd and the sheep and they remembered who they were. The metaphor of sheep and shepherd made sense to John's community. In ancient Palestine, shepherds brought the sheep of the village into a common sheepfold for the night. In the morning, in order to take his sheep out to the fields for grazing, each shepherd had to separate his sheep from the common flock. Each sheep had a name, and each shepherd had a particular way of calling his sheep, so each sheep would respond only to its own shepherd. Even if another shepherd called the sheep by its own name, it would not respond. It was the knowing that counted.

John's community knew about good shepherds and bad shepherds: the thieves of the story who taxed those who were poor further into poverty, others who starved the people and fed themselves, some who traded the shalom of their tradition for the Pax Romana. No doubt they longed for a good shepherd. In John's telling of the Jesus story, they hear that Jesus is the good shepherd, the way of comfort and sustenance, abundance and strength, hope and life, even in the face of death.

I can imagine that sometimes their fear got the best of them, and they got more concerned about the identity of the stranger than their own identity. So sometimes John's gospel sounds jarringly exclusive, in puzzling contrast to Jesus' voice of radical, extravagant, and inclusive welcome. But the story of the shepherd helped them to remember a better way. They knew about the way of the good shepherd, and that was the way of love, not fear.

They became the people of the Good Shepherd. Early Christians began to scratch the image of the Good Shepherd, lamb slung over his shoulders, on catacomb walls; they painted frescoes onto baptismal fonts to mark the beginning of life and they carved the Good Shepherd into tombs, to mark the end of it. They belonged to the Good Shepherd, from beginning to end. Good Shepherd was more than words, more than an idea; it was their way of life, their brand.

This brand of the Good Shepherd told them whom they followed, who they were, and more than that, how to live. They were to live the Good Shepherd way.

They knew that they belonged, but it didn't stop there. The way of the Good Shepherd was the way of the wide embrace and the long reach. Just as each one of them had found a safe spot on the inside of their tight circle of belonging, so were they to include the ones at the far edge. Just as they had been given hope in bleak and violent times, so were they to encourage one another. Just as they were held close in the comfort of the loving shepherd, so were they to reach out.

And they became known, those early followers of Jesus, for their generosity, for the way they cared for the very least, last, and lost, and for the common good. They became known for their love. They became the Beloved Community.

Isn't that how we want to be known? Isn't that what we want to be revealed about us? Isn't that what our churches must be today in our climate of fear? The Beloved Community, practicing not the exclusion of the stranger but the hard work of love. The opposite of fear, after all, is love.

Seeing the people who are most vulnerable in our neighborhoods and reading the latest headlines about guns, bans, and discrimination, I want all of us to do the hard work of love. Not sweet sentiment, but the heavy lifting of the shepherd.

I am not a shepherd, so I don't know how to describe that heavy lifting. I could quote scripture about love casting out fear. But the best way I know how to describe the work of love is through the love of my grandmother, who knew and loved Jesus and her neighbors and made sure I did, too, at every opportunity.

I believe that what we need in our churches and our schools and our homes and our public squares is a kind of love that looks something like my grandmother's love. The kind of love I'm talking about is tender, and it's fierce:

- It means naming danger when it threatens, and meeting it with savvy and with courage.
- It means celebrating and defending the dignity of every human being.
- It means teaching the difference between right and wrong.
- It means showing up, being present, caring, not expecting somebody else to handle it.
- It means being responsible for our words and our actions, and calling on others—including public officials who have forgotten about justice and mercy—to take responsibility for their actions.
- It means having a strong sense of identity and belonging, coupled with a profound respect and appreciation for otherness.
- It means compassion, knowing that we are all in this together.

And of course it means getting your heart broken, which opens you to hold the pain as well as the beauty of being fully human.

In these chaotic and uncertain times, remember who and whose you are. Listen for the voice of the shepherd calling you, and calling you beloved. Remember the way of Jesus who brought the reign of God near and showed us what true love looks like and how that love changed the course of human history. Practice that love. It might just change that soundtrack of fear.

AMEN

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