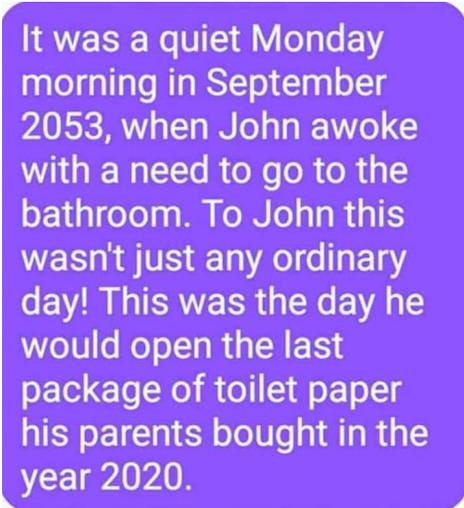
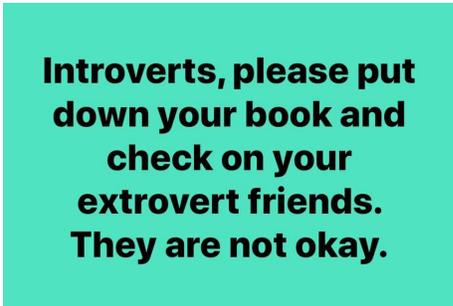
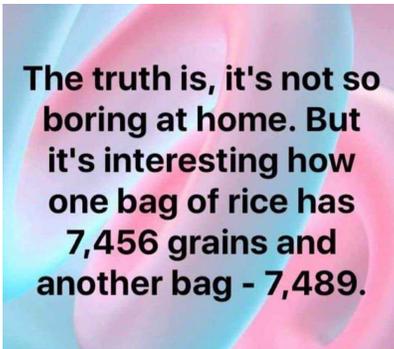




Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Lent
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
March 22, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

There's an ancient curse you've probably heard before. The curse says "may you live in interesting times." We are certainly living through interesting times, far more interesting than any of us would have asked for. And yet, by God's grace, we are still able to see the humor of life – even in dark times. In place of telling a joke this morning, as I usually do when I begin a sermon, I thought I'd pass along a few of the funny lines that have circulated recently online – short one liners that seek to find the humor in the midst of our anxiety.



Ok, so most of those were pretty corny, and no doubt you've seen many of them already, but now they are immortalized in this video for future generations, so that's something, anyway.

Normally, for a service of Morning Prayer on a Sunday, we use the readings appointed for use at the daily office that day and not the readings appointed for that day's Sunday Eucharist, because, normally, one has a Eucharist on Sunday. Since we will not be able to share a Eucharist today I have read two of the Eucharistic readings this morning: Psalm 23 and John 9.

I chose John 9 because I wanted to be sure you had the opportunity to hear the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday in Lent proclaimed to you: it is the good news that Jesus is the healer of the world's brokenness and it is the message that our job is to put our trust in him and not try to fight what he is doing.

I chose Psalm 23 because I can think of no more appropriate Psalm to be read in the midst of plague, and pestilence, and national emergency. Psalm 23 is the Queen of the Psalms; the one we memorized as children and learned to say by heart as we learned the Lord's Prayer. It is one of those passages that stands at the pinnacle of the Hebrew scriptures.

It needs only a little commentary from me today. I cannot embellish it or make it better in any way, but I can draw your attention to some particular images within its language that are especially relevant to where we find ourselves.

First of all, it is a hymn to the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit calls us through these words of Holy Scripture to put our faith in the goodness of Jesus this fourth Sunday in Lent. The Holy Spirit calls us to believe that Jesus is good, that Jesus is God, and that therefore God is good – however hard, or anxious, or sad we may find our lives to be. The Good Shepherd is good and he will guide us through days ahead.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit calls us to walk through the valley of the shadow of death without fear. The plague that is presently sweeping the world is bringing death – but not just the death of individuals, terrible as that is. It is also bringing the death of the sense of safety we have known, the death of financial stability, and the death of cherished ways of life. The words of the Psalm invite us to pass through the shadow of these things without fear. Why? Because Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has conquered death and swallowed it up in resurrection. On the other side of this plague will come new life, a resurrection of our people and our society, and a new world of hope, because even if we cannot celebrate Easter this year, Easter has already happened – 2,000 years ago, and nothing can undo what our Lord Jesus Christ has done.

Finally, the Holy Spirit calls us to trust that whatever the immediate future may hold, our eternal future is secure. “goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

A few years ago as I reflected on my life while reading the 23rd Psalm I tried to write a paraphrase of the Psalm that expressed something of my own experience of the Good Shepherd. I’ll close with it this morning, if you’ll indulge me. It’s not the greatest paraphrase ever written but it is mine.

Lord, you are my Shepherd,

every little thing gonna be alright.

You’ve given me enough to eat,

and a place to sleep,

and people who love me.

And you’ve shown me how to follow you

and find the meaning of my life.

I’ve also had bad times,

and bad times will come again,

but I won’t be afraid, just as long as you stand by me.

In the midst of all the anxiety and pain,

you give me bread and wine and oil,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

your life creating my life.

Surely, in light of all this,

I can believe that you are my everlasting home.

Amen.