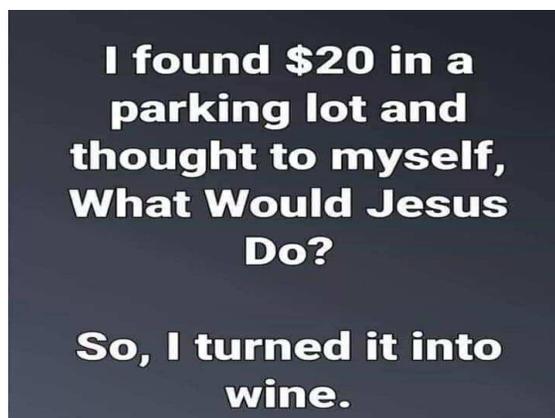
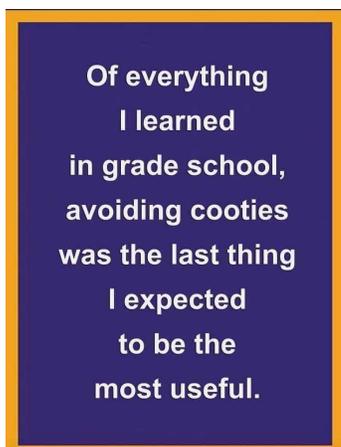




Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Rev. Jonathan Stepp  
May 3, 2020

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

It's been a few weeks since we laughed together at some Facebook memes, so let's begin this morning with a few funny ones I saw recently.



Humor, of course, is in the eye of the beholder – so, you're probably either laughing or groaning right now.

This fourth Sunday of Easter is nicknamed "Good Shepherd Sunday" for reasons that I think are obvious if you were listening during our scripture readings. The shepherd imagery for God is very ancient and deeply powerful. It speaks to some of our deepest needs as human beings: the need to be guided, the desire to be protected, and the longing to have reassurance that all will be well in the grand scheme of things. These needs have never been more deeply felt that they are now, when we are in the midst of a plague.

Interestingly, use of the images of Jesus the Good Shepherd as a symbol for Christianity were more prevalent in the early days of Christianity than images of the cross. Archaeologists have found many images of the Good Shepherd in Christian places of burial and worship dating back as far as the second century A.D., but images of the cross are not found as prominently until later, around the fourth and fifth century. Obviously, the cross of Christ was a key piece of imagery from the beginning but early Christians in places like Antioch

and Rome seem to have often found the Good Shepherd imagery more compelling as a subject of artistic expression.

One reason for this might be found in the ancient Greek and Roman culture. For some centuries before Jesus, the god Hermes was represented in art as a Good Shepherd. In a story that seems especially relevant to our circumstances, Hermes was said to have saved the city of Tanagra from a plague by walking around the walls of the city carrying a ram on his shoulders and thus appeasing the gods.

Hermes was, among other things, a messenger who brought word from the other gods to mortals as well as a shepherd and guide to those who were lost. He was believed to be a special kind of guide – a Psychopompos, a god who guided the dead from this world to the life of the world to come. So, it would seem, that many early Greek and Roman Christians saw in Jesus a Good Shepherd who was even better than the old Shepherd Hermes: a healer in times of plague, a messenger, a guide and a Shepherd for the lost, in whom they could truly place their trust.

There are at least two ways that we could view the connection between Hermes and Jesus. One theory would be to assume that the imagery of Hermes was intentionally applied to Jesus as a kind of advertising campaign: Christians wanted pagans to believe in Jesus so they co-opted the Shepherd imagery and applied it to Jesus.

But I think there's another way to look at it – a way which might actually help us in our own spiritual lives. Being a good shepherd is something that is inherent in who God is: God is a healer, a guide, and a protector. Long before Jesus came on the scene, humanity's experience of God told them that this must be true. As people tried to articulate this experience of the divine they created the imagery of Hermes to express this truth they knew deep in their souls. Then, when God became flesh as the man Jesus Christ, humanity recognized that in Jesus the shepherding heart that they had assigned to Hermes had become flesh and blood and made his dwelling among them.

In this understanding of Hermes and Jesus, there is, in fact, a deeply true and powerful connection between the two of them. Hermes is the foreshadowing of Christ, he is a sign given to the ancient Greeks and Romans that prepared them for the coming of Christ and pointed them to the true nature of God's heart that would be revealed in Jesus.

If we view the Good Shepherd imagery in this way, then it tells us something very important about Christ: even when we cannot see, feel, or explain, God's presence and work in our lives, God is still present and still shepherding us. When the ancient Greeks and Romans experienced God's guiding, shepherding presence but they could not fully see it or explain it – Hermes was as close as they could come to putting a face on it. God's faithfulness to heal and guide humanity is not bound to our ability to perceive his work and it is certainly not bound by our ability to understand or explain it.

So, even now, as we wander through dark places and valleys filled with the shadow of death, we can rest assured that God is guiding us, working for our healing, and shepherding us faithfully towards a brighter day. The Good Shepherd has been with humanity from the very beginning, and he will never leave us or forsake us, because he is not just any old shepherd, he is the *Good* Shepherd.

Amen.