

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
November 20, 2011, Christ the King Sunday
 Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Ephesians 1:15-23

FOUND

Last Saturday the 91 churches of the Presbytery of Great Rivers met for our Assembly Meeting, by ZOOM of course. Part of the meeting was provided by a psychologist from Leaderwise, a counseling company in Minneapolis that cares for pastors and congregations. The leadership team of the Presbytery realized what a stressful time this is for pastors, Elders and churches.

They wanted to give us insight into doing ministry in these days,
 and offer us ways to care for ourselves as church leaders during this world pandemic.

So, they invited the speaker, Dr. Danny Elenz, PsyD, LP, to guide us in a discussion. He began by filling the screen with the words and images of this season; one by one they appeared: Coronavirus, job loss, Election 2020, churches closed by Covid, the world climate crisis, George Floyd, "I can't breath," social distancing, the blue & red election map, balancing working from home and school from home, masking. By the time the screen was full of those words and images I was thoroughly in touch with how overwhelming these days are...again.

Then Dr. Elenz confirmed that these months have been one of the most challenging times in our life and in our ministry.

He talked about the rise in anxiety, despair, substance abuse, suicide, trauma symptoms, family violence, loneliness, isolation, and depression.

We even learned a new word: "Coronasomnia!" Coronasomnia is the word used to describe how many people's sleep patterns have been disrupted.

He told us that dentists are seeing a startling increase in cracked teeth because of the amount of stress people living with. (New York Times, 9/11/2020)

Thankfully Dr. Elenz then offered us ways to practice self-care. He told us that "We Need to Give Ourselves Permission: To be HUMAN, To be unproductive, To feel what we feel, To not have it all together, To not know, To be uncertain, and To be imperfect."

We then were put into small groups where we could talk honestly with other elders and ministers about what this time has been like for us. It was helpful to realize that all of us are finding this season to be difficult, challenging, heart-breaking at times, and that it is pushing us to do ministry in new ways.

http://www.greatriverspby.org/uploads/2/4/5/6/24561669/coping_with_turbulent_times_-_connecting_and_committing_to_my_health.pdf

Throughout the rest of the Assembly meeting we heard words and Scripture passages of encouragement and comfort for the living of these days. And now here we are, gathered as a Family of Faith on Christ the King Sunday, each with our own list of what the living of these days is like for us.

Collectively we are in the ninth month of a world pandemic, in the week that our country has reached the heartbreaking milestone of at least 250,000 deaths from COVID19, and over 1.34 million deaths from Covid in the world. And we come Christ the King Sunday that is meant to remind us of where we need to be, and Who we need to be with, when we feel overwhelmed by life, overwhelmed by the present, and fearful of the future.

Because we're not the only ones, and this is not the only time in history that people have felt

this overwhelmed.

In the passage we read this morning from Ezekiel God was speaking to the Israelites who had been taken prisoner and marched across hundreds of miles of desert to slavery in Babylon. The life they knew was destroyed, the life they were living was slavery.

Into the midst of that destruction and desperation,
 Into the midst of being overwhelmed by the present,
 and fearful of the future
 God spoke comforting hope to the people and said:

“I will be the shepherd of my people:
 I will seek the lost,
 and I will bring back the strayed,
 and I will bind up the injured,
 and I will strengthen the weak,
 I will feed them with justice.”

Into a situation of great despair the Israelites were reminded that their God was with them. They were reminded that they were loved by a God who could find them no matter what life had brought to them.

No matter how far from home they were,
 no matter how they were injured and weakened by the realities of their lives,
 God was with them.
 God was their Shepherd in the worst time of their life,
 caring for them no matter what their lives held.

This is the meaning of Christ the King Sunday. No matter what is happening in our lives, no matter how overwhelmed we are by the world we live in, no matter how often we feel like we are exiles in a foreign land, God is with us.

Christ is the Shepherd King who will always find us and care for us
 no matter what life is holding, even in 2020!

There was another time in history when church leaders believed that people needed to be reminded of Christ as our All-Powerful King and Good Shepherd. We are not the only ones, and this is not the only time in history, that people have felt overwhelmed by all that is happening around them, overwhelmed by the present, and fearful of the future.

Christ the King Sunday was started exactly because people were feeling this way in 1925. That was the year that it was decided that this last Sunday before the beginning of Advent would be Christ the King Sunday. Pope Pius XI, followed by Protestant church leaders, were seeing their people reeling from all the devastation and violence of World War I. The world was now witnessing the rise of dictators. In 1921 Hitler started the Nazi party and began his rise to power, and Mussolini had become Prime Minister of Italy in 1922.

Pope Pius XI saw the church becoming less important in people's lives and in the culture, and Christians, both Catholic and Protestant were doubting Christ's power and authority. With all that people had experienced during World War I, many people were doubting Christ's existence.

So Pius instituted Christ the King Sunday, and he was soon followed by Protestant denominations around the world. He had three main points to be made each Christ the King Sunday. “1. That nations would see that the Church had the right to freedom, and immunity from the state

(Quas Primas, 32.)

2. That leaders and nations would see that they are bound to give respect to Christ.

(Quas Primas, 31)

3. And that the faithful would gain strength and courage from the celebration of Christ the King Sunday (the feast), as we are reminded that Christ must reign in our hearts, minds, wills, and bodies.

(Quas Primas, 33)"

<http://www.churchyear.net/ctksunday.html>

Christ the King Sunday is a modern celebration based on the ancient truth of the Gospel. Today we celebrate the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord and King over all creation, over all the Universe, and over all of our lives, even and especially in 2020.

This Christ the King Sunday is a reminder for us on this eve of Thanksgiving and the rush to Christmas, even as we may celebrate them differently than we ever have before.

It is a reminder for us as Christians as we prepare to enter the Season of Advent.

It is a reminder for us in 2020 to stick close to our Shepherd King.

You've probably heard the story of the two friends talking about their health problems.

"I have trouble sleeping sometimes, one of them says. (And now we know it might be Coronasomnia!)

"So do I," says the other, "What do you do for it?"

"I count sheep," he said, "What do you do?"

"I talk to the shepherd, he's up all night."

What do we do when we are overwhelmed by the life we and our world are living?

What do we do when we're overwhelmed by the news that comes to us second by second on our devices?

What do we do when we're crying ourselves to sleep at night, and being brave during the day?

What do we do when we're scared about the world our children and grandchildren are growing up in?

What do we do when our only mantra seems to be: "What is this world coming to?" "This is soooo 2020!"

What do we do?

We run to the shepherd!

We pray: "Jesus help me!"

And when all seems lost we pray: "Jesus come and find me."

And I know that even before you've finished that prayer, Jesus is right there with you, and in time you'll come to realize that he was there with you the whole time.

There was a time in my life years ago that I felt like I was sinking into a deeper and deeper valley and there was very little light left. My spiritual director at the time Sr. Lois said to me, "Becky open your eyes, Jesus is already there, in fact he was already in the darkness even before you fell into it, he will sit there with you in the darkness."

It is a lesson I learn over and over again in the valleys in my life, that Jesus the Good Shepherd is already there in our valleys. He is already there to be with us, to bind up our wounds, to carry us to safety.

In ancient biblical times the Kings were often called Shepherds because of the way they cared for their people. Today, on Christ the King Sunday, we remember and celebrate the way Christ our Shepherd King loves each one of us. In the midst of our questions, in the midst of fear and uncertainty, in the midst of the chaos of 2020, the Good Shepherd says to you, and to me: "I am here...always!"

Six or seven years ago our Adult Sunday School class heard a wonderful story about Jesus' tenacious love from Tex Sample, a retired professor and amazing storyteller. The story he told goes like this:

William K. McElvaney was the President of the Saint Paul School of Theology for 12 years. He tells the story of being caught in a traffic jam at the foot of the Paseo Bridge in Kansas City. What he did not know until he read it in the paper the next day was that a major drama was occurring on that bridge. It seems that a man had pulled up into the outside lane of that bridge in his car, got out of the car, went over the rail of the bridge and down into its substructure and poised himself there between two girders, trying to get the courage to jump.

Someone saw him. Called the police. They came. They put a patrolman in a harness with a rope and they fed him rope as he climbed over that same rail, down into the substructure of that bridge, but some feet away so as not to provoke a jump. As he's crawling along through the girders he's talking to the man, very gently saying, "Sir, I don't know what's happened, I don't know what's going on, but I want you to know that we are here to help you, we can help you, and we will help you. Please give us the chance to do that."

When the patrolman is within an arm's reach of the man, he jumps. But the patrolman, anticipating it, times his jump with him, and leaps into the air, and grabs him, with both arms. And as they're falling, he struggles and wraps both legs around him. And the slack goes out of that rope and they hit at the end, and then bounce, and just swing over that yawning river way below.

At the top of the bridge, they can hear this patrolman, yelling at the top of his lungs, "If you go, I go, because I'm going to hold onto you, 'til hell freezes over."

Sample says:

We worship that kind of God. A God who shows up in the nitty-gritty,
a God who wraps us in everlasting arms and legs
and refuses to let us go 'til hell freezes over.

Sample, Tex, DVD: *Tex Mix—Stories of Earthy Mysticism, with Tex Sample on DVD*,
livingthequestions.com, LLC, 2008

Our Good Shepherd says to you, and to me, this day: (Ezekiel 34)

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek you out.

As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep,
so I will seek out you, my sheep.

I will rescue you from all the places to which you have been scattered
on a day of clouds and thick darkness

I myself will be your shepherd.

I will seek you when you are lost,
and I will bring you back when you have strayed,
and I will bind you up when you are injured,
and I will strengthen you when you are weak,
I will feed you with justice.

May we hold tightly to this Good News as the Good Shepherd holds tightly onto us.
Amen, and Amen.