

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Links to Christ and Grace

*****Worship service and sermon posted each Saturday evening**

YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgveCGQgn0okeiNXLcmZI_w?view_as=subscriber

Website: <https://www.christandgrace.org/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ChristandGracePetersburg/>

OFFERINGS: Thank you to all who sent in your contribution this past week. We know that this is an extraordinarily challenging time, with many facing serious financial hardship. So many of you who need the church right now feel terrible about not being able to support it financially. Please remove this from your list of worries. We are here to support each other, and we will get through this together. We know that those who are able to do more to support the church at this time will do so, recognizing that if the shoe were on the other foot, our fellow parishioners would gladly do the same for us. It's who we are and what we do.

For those who are able, please know that you can make a contribution electronically by going to "Give" at www.christandgrace.org. Offerings can be set up for a one time or recurring gift. The church is charged a fee for this service. If you are able to include the fee with your offering, the total amount is tax deductible. Or you can set up a regular payment through your bank's bill pay, or mail checks to Christ and Grace 1545 S. Sycamore Street, Petersburg, VA 23805.

PRAYER LIST: We beg you to feed the hungry, protect the refugee, embrace the distressed, house the homeless, nurse the sick, and comfort the dying. Especially we pray for Tyrone Allen, Robyn Arrington, Brian Hettinger, Horace Higgins, Mark Jones, Josh Lumley, Mike McKibbin, Addison Owens, Lilly Rudd, Mark Sheffield, Ted Simpson, Wendy Taft, Larry Tucker, and Paige Whitley.

WEDNESDAY SERVING OPPORTUNITY:

Did you know that you can serve others while you shop for your groceries?

Each Wednesday we are collecting food for the Hope Center Food Pantry. You may bring food and leave it in the plastic bin at the back door. If you would like to send a monetary contribution to the Hope Center they would be most appreciative. Send to The Hope Center at 827 Commerce Street, Petersburg, VA 23803. You can also donate via their website at dcuhopecenter.org. Items needed at this time are: canned fruits, vegetables, meats, tuna, stew, and pasta sauces - no glass. No pasta is needed at this time.

FORWARD DAY BY DAY (MAY-JUNE- JULY):

Available for pick up on Wednesdays at the back door of the church.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

ZOOM BIBLE STUDY FOR EVERYONE, THURSDAYS AT 7 PM

We continue this Thursday, April 30 with chapters 3-5. This class is for everyone - whether you win or lose at Bible trivia! We will hear the stories of how the church became the church, and how the Holy Spirit empowered a group of scared and uncertain disciples in an unprecedented and unpredictable time. So yes, it's relevant.

The people and the stories easily connect to the joys and challenges of our lives today both in the Church and in the world. The end of the story leaves us with an invitation to continue the story as we walk in the way of Jesus. **If you are interested, please email Robin+ and she will send you the link and instructions to join the Zoom meeting each Thursday morning.**

You can use any device that has a camera and microphone - smartphone or laptop or iPad or desktop, however it's more difficult to see when using a phone. You can go to zoom.us and find all sorts of helpful info. Here is another tutorial video to watch that I found helpful - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9isp3qPeQ0E&t=400s>

MESSAGE FROM ROBIN+

Last week we began to consider what church, and indeed all of life, will look like as we move forward after the pandemic. We noted the strangeness of this in between or liminal time, while at the same time recognizing it as a time to discover the next new normal for our congregation. Exploring five specific areas of focus can help us move forward in healthy and sustainable ways. Last week we focused on the act of surrender, which is not to give up but to acknowledge that we don't have all or even any of the answers. We yield our spirit to God's leading and we attend to all that arises in response to our surrender.

Our next area of focus is innovation. All innovation begins with disorientation. People must let the old status quo fail before we can embrace innovation. We should acknowledge that the status quo failed us some time ago. The world is different now, people engage with church differently now, yet we've been falsely clinging to the old normal because there was too much pain in letting go.

The pandemic has thrown us into deep disorientation. Now, we have no choice but to let go of the old normal. We occupy space on both sides of a threshold. One foot is rooted in something trying to end; another is planted in a thing not yet defined, something waiting to begin. We cling to structures, identities and relationships formed by our old experiences, although we know that those processes and practices will not serve us adequately moving forward. We can all think of favorite ministries and activities that just stopped working, and while there is regret, we know that these meaningful things have served us well. And now God is inviting us to be innovative; to create new life, new activities, and new meaning in our parish life.

In an article in The Atlantic, Ed Yong writes, "the only viable endgame is to play whack-a-mole with the coronavirus, suppressing it until a vaccine can be produced. With luck, that will take 18 to 24 months. During that time, new outbreaks will probably arise. Much about that period is unclear, but the dozens of experts whom I have interviewed agree that life as most people knew it cannot fully return. "I think people haven't understood that this isn't about the next couple of weeks, this is about the next two years." said Michael Osterholm, an infectious-disease epidemiologist at the University of Minnesota."

So we will be playing whack-a-mole with the coronavirus for some time, and it will continue to affect the way we do church. We have been given this time to be innovative, and indeed we are doing just that with our new adventures in technology and new ways to reach our community. Worship on Youtube, inviting the community to visit our labyrinth and interact with us on Facebook, a new Zoom Bible study, a drop off bin for food for the hungry are all new ways of being church for us. What ideas do you have for a new and maybe even risky ministry? What are you missing right now? What is working well or not so well for you? Let a Vestry member know or contact me so that we can continue to find new ways to connect.

It would be a mistake to shore up the old structures and practices as things get “back to normal.” We need to take advantage of this moment to let old practices die, to experiment, to take risks and learn. That can be a very scary thing for many of us, but we are going to do this together. And as our lectionary readings remind us this week, we have a Shepherd to lead us out of our comfort zone to explore new green pastures.

Easter Blessings, Robin+

For insights shared I am indebted to Susan Beaumont - Finding Our New Normal, April 20, 2020
<https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/finding-our-new-normal/>

Ed Yong, Science Staff Writer, The Atlantic, “Our Pandemic Summer” April 14, 2020
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/pandemic-summer-coronavirus-reopening-back-normal/609940/?fbclid=IwAR3w3g0D9Ubp-aOyPZ9Lpl8abINUp5dINM1Ra2LgktfE4LLjUyxJFLxpU3I>

Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. John 10:1-10

In our gospel reading today we hear about a sheepfold with a gate. First century shepherds did not have access to the fencing materials we have today. They would make use of caves and they would build low-walled enclosures out of stone to protect the sheep at night from thieves and bandits. Many historians believe that the shepherd would become a human gate by lying down in the opening of the stone wall. In this way, the shepherd could guard the sheep from predators as well as keep the sheep safely contained inside the sheepfold. For the most part, this worked - until the thieves and bandits climbed in by another way to steal the sheep, which did happen, because sheep were very valuable.

Walls and gates create enclosures. Sometimes being in the sheepfold is a good thing. The sheep inside are protected and safe, they can sleep without fear because they trust the shepherd. But if the sheep stay enclosed in the sheepfold all the time, they aren't able to graze in green pastures, or drink beside still waters, or get exercise – and that is bad for their health. Some of us might be experiencing some negative consequences in these stay at home times – sleeping late, eating and drinking more than is good for us, and not getting enough exercise, never mind the daily steps we are missing from errands and activities we are no longer able to do. We can relate to being penned up too long!

Our gospel today reveals Jesus as the gate, which can also be translated as door. We also hear Jesus described as the shepherd. In fact, the very next verse following our text today is “I am the good shepherd.” So, in this blending of Jesus as both gate and shepherd, we hear the ambiguity and metaphor so often used in John's gospel. John states this intentional use of metaphor out loud saying, “Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”

So again Jesus said to them, because they could not understand, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.” For Jesus to *be* the gate, based on the practice of the shepherd lying down in the wall opening, is striking. It reminds me of the last verse of Psalm 121 – The Lord shall watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth for evermore.

Notice that he does not say, “I am that which separates, isolates, divides, and segregates.” Nor does he say, “I am the gate to keep you locked away safe from every harm and danger of the world.” What Jesus says is, “I am the gate. The doorway. The opening. The portal where freedom begins and the entrance into new and abundant life.

We might not associate gates or doors with freedom. We think of locks and alarms, confinement, restrictions. We imagine doors and gates as barriers to opportunity. But what if Jesus is a different kind of gate? A gate that opens out instead of holding us within. Not as a barrier or hindrance but the opening through which newness awaits. Not a gate but rather a gateway to wide open possibility, hope, and healing. “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” I am the gateway to salvation and wholeness of life.

What if this passage is not about restrictions or self-protection at all? In our human fear and frailty, we are inclined to build walls, close doors and lock gates. We do this to keep perceived dangers out and to keep what we love and cherish safe within. Might Jesus be encouraging us to trust that there is power far greater than any fear we have? Power to free us from fear? Power to deliver us from our need to stockpile and fortify our earthly treasures?

When we can trust that Jesus is the gate, it frees us from the weight of our need to control, it opens our lives to an expanse of love and joy and promise. When gatekeeping is no longer our job, suddenly we have the mental, physical, and spiritual power to focus on the coming of the kingdom and newness of life right here and now.

This is not to deny that life may bring threat and danger. The thieves and bandits that are a result of our wrong choices and their consequences, will still, from time to time, climb in by another way. They are the voices that will lead us away from the good shepherd. Life has its challenges. The promise from God is that in any threat or danger, our shepherd will be with us.

Maybe the questions for us are not about who is in or out of the safety of the sheepfold. Maybe they are about recognizing all the ways we resist the open gate, the ways we close our minds to change, the ways we keep our deepest hopes and dreams penned up inside. And just maybe, Jesus has the answers to our questions, if we will be still and listen for his voice.

This is where the Church serves as our safe pasture. As the early Christian community gathered to devote themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, we too will continue to devote ourselves to these things – in person again eventually, and for right now on Zoom, or exchanging cares and concerns, thanksgivings and joys through social media or handwritten notes or a phone call. We do this because the Church is the sheepfold, the place where we learn to recognize and respond to the voice of the shepherd. This describes the Church's inner life, which is preparing us for our life out in the world, a life of abundance – not for ourselves alone but for all.

In the weeks and months to come, we will be tempted to listen to the voices of thieves and bandits. Voices that will stoke fear and anxiety, or that will discount any need for precautions. Voices that will make promises they cannot keep about our well-being. Those are not the voice of the shepherd. But we will listen for the voice of our shepherd as we continue in teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers – however that might look going forward.

The sheepfold can be a metaphor for the Church, with Jesus as both gate and shepherd. We are called into the sheepfold to find life, and to strengthen our relationship with God. Then we are led out of the sheepfold, following the shepherd to new pastures, beyond our comfort zones; following him in all the ways he loves and cares for the *lost* sheep, the ones in need of healing, the ones who are hungry, the ones in need of abundant life, the ones who are waiting to hear the voice of the shepherd. Amen.