



*Come in for a Fireside Chat*

Welcome Brothers and Sisters,

After a week into May one might think that the image of a fireside chat would not be comforting, but it still fits quite well. This has been one of the coldest first weeks of May ever. There is a good chance that tonight we will set a record low. It's been a rough spring. We have four peach trees which bloomed profusely. They also got frosted profusely. We have peach blossom crisps. I don't recommend them. This week the apple trees are blooming profusely as well. Although apple blossoms seem to be a little tougher than peach, it will be touch and go for them also. I fear it may be too much touch. With all the troubles we are experiencing, we could have used some better weather to boost our spirits. Does it seem like piling on to you?

As the country enters the first phase of opening up, the forecasts are grim. For a time it was thought mitigation would hold the Covid 19 deaths to around 60,000. As of this morning they have reached 76,600 and the projections are now they will level off around 100,000 – 120,000. With the way the public is bent on returning to pre-virus activities, it is easy to see how it can break out in full force again, and the death rates will follow the break. It's not a pretty sight. I

surely understand why the nation has to get back to work, but not to recreation; not to unnecessary congregating... and certainly not without protection.

In our last conversation we began observing how relevant a 3,000 year old psalm is to our present distress. The Twenty-third Psalm has been a source of comfort to countless people when they have faced truly difficult circumstances. If we relate well to the imagery, we are encouraged from the outset as we read:

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.**

We talked at length about the comfort we can gain if we understand the imagery as it would have been understood three millennia ago. We did not have time or space to consider the implied qualifier; namely, that Jesus is our shepherd.

When we follow the Shepherd, we do not get to determine what form the green pastures or still waters take. Certainly we can get a sense of comfort and peace from the image of fresh grass or a lovely water feature, but they do not resolve the issues we are facing. As a real life experience they can be an alleviating palliative, but they are not the solution. The solution is found in following the Lord; and where He leads, we rarely know. We just follow.

We are like sheep. That's not a flattering image, but that is the creature a shepherd tends. Sheep are not very smart, not very strong, not very fast, and not very useful in their own right. There's no machoism in the image of a sheep. Sheep serve the purpose of supplying wool for clothing and meat for food. I suppose I wouldn't mind being used for wool, but not too keen on being served up as a roast. For the most part sheep depend on the shepherd and exist to serve a purpose greater than themselves.

Sheep make their way in the world not by the power of their own right hoof, but by the protection and direction of the shepherd. When they move from pasture to pasture they have no voice in when they move, where they go, or by what path they journey. They just follow. They trust the shepherd. They are familiar with the shepherd's voice and follow it without question. Several flocks can move together without identifying marks by which the shepherd separates his flock from the others. He simply speaks to them and the sheep separate themselves. They trust the shepherd to take care of them even if they have to follow him through rugged and arid terrain subject to predators and thieves as they depend on the shepherd to protect them.

We have such a shepherd. He is the good Shepherd. Jesus is the Shepherd who knows His sheep and is known by them (Jn. 10:14). He is the Good Shepherd who gives His life for His sheep (Jn. 10:11). Now He expects us to follow Him. When Jesus called the twelve He said, "Follow Me," and they went. The fishermen dropped their nets and left the sea behind. The tax collector left his lucrative position behind. The Zealot left his misguided zealotry behind. They did not ask where they were going and, if they had, they would have gotten little more than what they already had, "Follow Me." If they got any more, it would have been something like, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Mt. 8:30)." Still they followed.

We do not get to define our life when we follow our Lord. This is, arguably, mankind's greatest weakness, especially in our modern world of great material abundance. Even Christians want to create a vision of what life should be rather than seek and accept what the Lord's will is for it. Hence, when life turns south, as we say, and as it seems it has today, we feel justified in complaining and lamenting; or worse violating oaths, abandoning relationships, pursuing self-interest, and even leaving the Lord Himself. We say, "It's not fair." By human reason and self-interest it isn't fair, but man does not set the standard for life.

"The Lord is my shepherd" is the prerequisite for finding the green pastures and quiet waters. Discipleship does not lead, push, or demand; it follows. The Lord's water and grass provides the peace that will satisfy, but that is rarely our vision. We want what we want, and we want it now. The Lord says wait on Me and I will provide you water from which you will never thirst (Jn. 4:14) and bread from which you will never hunger (Jn. 16:35). If we do not believe this and walk in His footsteps, then Jesus is not our shepherd. If Jesus is not our shepherd, we cannot expect we will find our way out of our present distress and we cannot expect to return to any semblance of the good things we formerly had.

While we are struggling with this global plague and it's potentially long-term consequences, we have time to reflect upon our discipleship. Am I really following the Shepherd or am I trying to push Him? Am I searching for my own green pastures and exciting new waters, and, then, asking the Lord to accompany me, or am I following Him to the pastures and waters He says and knows are best for me? Am I willing to accept what He gives me or if I don't get what I want, am I going to deny Him?

If we can determine that we have been truly His disciples or, if we determine that we have not, but are ready to follow Him now, our prayers will be extremely effective. We can have confidence that He will, indeed, lead us to green pastures and quiet waters. Let us examine ourselves and ardently pray for His blessings.

Again, until we meet again, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may His light shine upon you and grant you peace.