



**St Stephens Williamstown Uniting Church in Australia**  
**Service of the Word at Home - during Coronavirus Lockdown**  
**Fourth Sunday of Easter 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020**  
Prepared by Rev S. Juliette Maua'i

*Place a cross and Bible on a table (if possible) on top of White/Gold cloth (or similar) which is today's Liturgical Colour.*  
*Prepare reflective music, hymns, songs to play as you feel prompted.*  
**Readings: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10**

*(Choose your hymn/ song to play and sing along... you might have a hymn/ song ready to play on YouTube)*  
**Song suggestion: Christ be my leader by night as by day...**

**Call to Worship** *(adapted from Psalm 23, The Message)*

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.  
You bed me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from.  
In your Word, you let me catch my breath, you send me in the right direction.  
Even when the way goes through death valley,  
I AM not afraid; You, walk at my side.  
Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.  
You serve me a six-course dinner before my enemies.  
You revive my drooping head and worried mind, my cup brims with blessing.  
Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.  
I AM back home in the house of God, for the rest of my life.

**Opening Prayer**

**God Creator,**  
**You are the one who comes to us in the risen Jesus Christ.**  
**You are the one who comes to us in the Holy Spirit.**  
**God who has sovereign of Earth and Heaven,**  
**You call us to recognise you today and every day;**  
**even as mysterious as you are to humankind.**  
**Gather our hearts and minds this day.**  
**Kindle our God-consciousness.**  
**And let us worship you in awe and wonder! Amen!**

*(Choose your hymn/ song to play and sing along... you might have a hymn/ song ready to play on YouTube)*  
**Song suggestion: Brother sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you...**

**Prayer of Confession**

Merciful God,  
We often dwell on what we cannot control, rather than what we can do.  
Raise us out of what restricts us, for we are Resurrected People! **Lord, have mercy!**  
Risen Lord, increase our awareness of you and remind us we are called in your image.  
Renewing Spirit, may we rise from our isolation to live in you, differently  
and not as though you are a Sunday-only event! **Christ have mercy!**

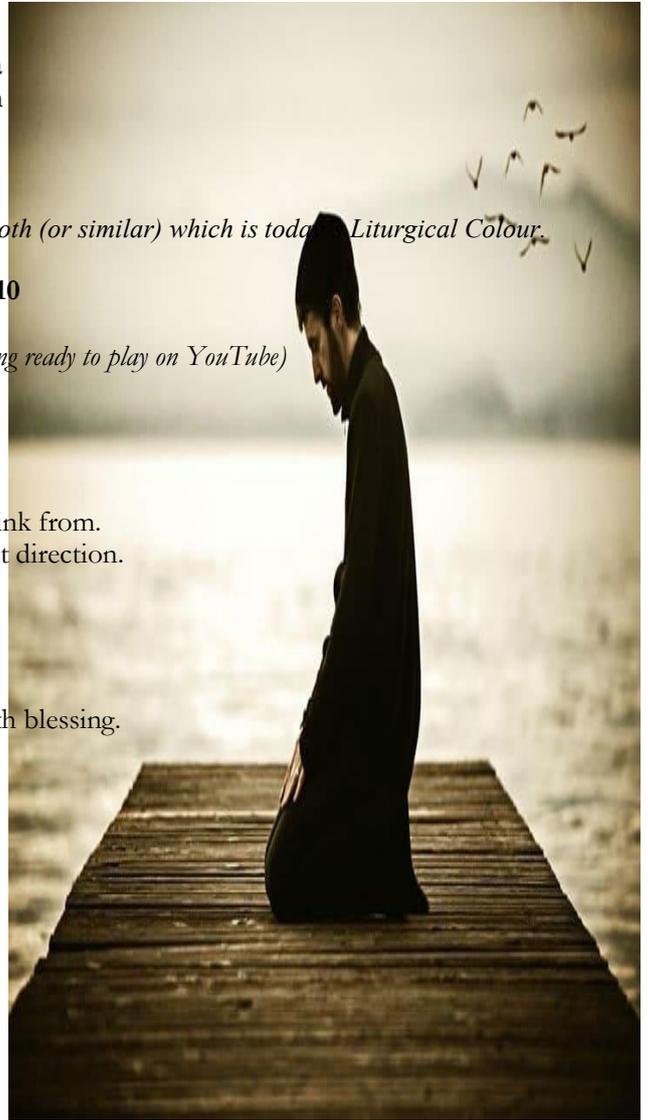
Living Lord,

shake us out of what holds us back but to live in your deep mystery and infinite presence, full of grace and love; not as though we long to sit in the darkness of Good Friday,  
but as people who long to live in your Light and Life! **Lord have mercy!**  
Forgive us for our narrow and selfish ways, saving us from cheap grace, with your abundant grace and mercy.  
**Forgive us, O God. We ask in Jesus' precious name. Amen.**

**Words of Assurance**

Holy Shepherd, we are your sheep.  
Help us to enter by the door when we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.  
Pardon us for these past weeks that we have turned away from your voice and pardon us.  
Through Christ's saving grace, you and yours are forgiven, and we go in. **Amen.**

**Song suggestion: The Lord's my shepherd I'll not want...**



**Reflection: Do you hear the voice of God in this climate of change or is it that you hear God when it suits you?!**

Each day since the Coronavirus restrictions began, the news has been full of updates of where we are at with statistics of the number of Coronavirus infections, what the statistics tell us, the number of deaths succumbed to the Coronavirus, as well as being in-undated by loads of information. This is of course, dependent on your mode or device to listen to or read from. Perhaps, you may be in the minority and have committed to taking a sabbatical from all communications!

Since the temporary closures of businesses, places of worship, whether or not schools should remain open, and the conditions around these decisions from the government and chief medical officer and expert decision-makers, there are many voices we have had to listen to, and for good reasons, as we navigate this COVID-19 lockdown from our homes.

There is no denying that you and your household, will rise from this once in a lifetime event such as we are living out, as changed peoples!

Situations arise where you will hear many voices, and probably *look* for other voices, to help you discern your way forward. COVID-19 is one of those situations. Weddings, baptisms, graduations, change of employment or retiring from employment, expecting or adopting a baby or child, and funerals, are examples of such situations. At the end of the day, you will decide (you and yours, and others may help if you seek them out) as only you will know your context and, you know yourself better than anyone else.

This week's Gospel reading, the apostle John (10:1-10) emphasizes the Shepherd, the sheep, and the gate. In ancient times, shepherds and sheep were part of common life. As such, livestock and herds and their tenders were often used as actual references. They were also a metaphorical reference to leaders, their followers, and type of leadership.



Most may think of a shepherd being male. But a shepherd can also be female, that is, a shepherdess (cf. *Rachel, Genesis 29:9; Zipporah, Exodus 2:16-21; Song of Solomon/Song of Songs 1:5-8*).

The shepherdess' maternal tendencies is to shepherd like a mother would lead and feed her flock, to open the door (gate), and to gather her sheep home to safety (Brueggeman, W; Gaudino, Rebecca J. Kruger, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, 1997).

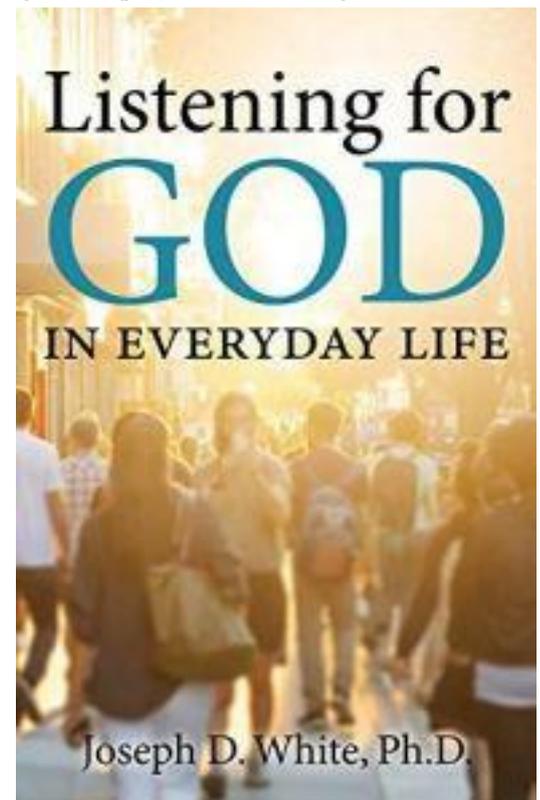
Just like a mother knows her children by name, their distinct voice and character, good and bad, so too does the shepherdess know each of her flock. She will not rest easy until they are home, even when they have left the safety of the sanctuary or grazing fields, for she cherishes each of her flock whom she has made it her mission to know them well. She relates to each of her sheep and likewise, they know their shepherd. It is a two-way relationship.

Surely this is good news for all believers! We are living as the 'gathered people of God' though we are currently physically separated. This does not mean that we are separated from God, in Christ, the risen Lord! We can choose to be in relationship with the shepherd we know, and we can choose to listen attentively for her voice. If not, then whose voice will you follow?

To the stranger's voice, the thief will enter the pen by some other way (v.1) Jesus says, when he addresses the Pharisees. Remember, friends, that today's gospel reading follows the story of the blind man whom the Pharisees questioned, and to which highlights their spiritual blindness. They do not hear or see, Jesus!

The sheep belonging to the good shepherdess will know her voice and her flock will listen to her. They will "never follow a stranger" (cf. vv.5-6). This, the Pharisees did not understand!

The good shepherdess/the good gate keeper, welcomes her/his sheep through the gate. "And the sheep listen to [her]/his voice", for the Good Shepherd/Good Shepherdess calls his/her flock, "and leads them out" to pasture (v.3).



To this end, many find Psalm 23 a comforting Psalm of prayer and is often read at funerals. It is a psalm for every day not just at funerals. It is a psalm of hope and affirmation in times of uncertainty and sorrow. It is a psalm of 'Joy!' The Psalm 23 reading for this Sunday, is for all people and not just for believers!

In the risen Christ, salvation is offered to all. To believers who are anticipating a celebratory gathering after the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, I hope you continue to listen for the voice of the shepherd that leads you to lush pastures and to drink from the quiet pools.



May you in your isolation be uplifted in the surety of Easter Sunday joy! Psalm 23 testifies that in life's trials and in life's joys, we are not alone. 'I AM' is with you! The trustworthy staff/crook of the good shepherd secures you and guides you to catch your breath during this time, so that on the other side of lockdown you will know new directions.

Psalm 23 is an assurance to life beyond this life, in and through, Jesus Christ – The Divine Shepherd! Jesus, "the Way, the Truth, and the Life".

Are you listening St Stephens? Whose voice will you listen for, friends? And is your listening well-attuned to the Good Shepherd, the risen Lord God? Alleluia, Christ is Risen! He is risen, indeed! Amen.

#### **Call for Offering**

Good Shepherd of the Sheep,  
you have opened the door to new life for us

through your dedication and your sacrifice.

May we reflect your love for us by opening the doors of our hearts to you and your church in the act of giving our tithes and offerings.

#### **Offertory Prayer**

Thank you, Risen Christ,

for moving the hearts of the people to give of themselves.

May our offerings of service and financial support give voice to your work in this world.

May we grow more mindful of you through our giving and our living even as the separated Body of Christ. **Amen.**

#### **Benediction**

May God, the heart of life, reside deep within you and yours, this day.

May God, the Christ be your risen inspiration in our days of lockdown.

May God, the Spirit, empower you to live and look forward in new ways.

Live fearlessly and creatively as God calls you to.

Break out in dance, break out in songs of praise,

and celebrate whose flock you are called by name. **Amen!**

**May the Peace of the Lord be always with you! Go well into another week... and go with GOD!**

