

Good Shepherd Sunday – April 24, 2021
The Rev. Debra Slade – St. Francis Episcopal Church, Stamford, CT

It was around four pm on Thursday, March 4th when my husband Peter decided to take a break from the computer work he had been doing in our second floor home office. He had been there the whole day except for lunch. He went into our bedroom on the same floor, and after about ten minutes he heard a large crash, followed by what he said was the sound of uncooked pasta falling on the ground. Convinced it had to have been Ernie, our cat up to no good he wandered down to the familyroom, and saw that our large skylight about twenty feet above him had shattered, and there was pebbles of glass raining into the room, now exposed to the sky and open air. It was a cold day, and Peter assumed it might have something to do with it, but whatever – it needed to be replaced and so he called Ridgefield Glass to discuss the repair. As he spoke to them, he wandered back to his office and was greeted by a shocking sight! Our home office's front wall has glass windows halfway up the wall allowing you to peer down into the family room, and also to see the skylight about six feet away that offers a wonderful view of the lake at the front of the house. In one of these glass windows was a very obvious bullet hole, and when Peter turned around there was an equally dramatic bullet hole in the back wall of the office, that is also the back wall of our house. There was no question that a bullet had been shot into the front of our house shattering the skylight. It had then sailed through the family room, gone through the glass window/wall of the office, through the office where Peter had been most of the day, and then into the drywall of the back wall of the office. When the Ridgefield police arrived, they cut open the wall and found the bullet. The bullet had been shot from a 9mm handgun. This was not an ordinary day, even in COVID times.

By the time I got home from the hospital that evening, the police had left, and the sight of the shattered skylight open to the night sky with the piles of broken glass on the floor, combined with the bullet holes in the window and wall were enough to sink my heart, and bring me straight back to the horrible early months of the pandemic when fear was the dominant emotion. What if Peter had walked through the office ten minutes later and had been hit by the bullet, or Laura had been sitting on the office couch where she usually sits when she hangs out with her father, her head being at the exact right spot where the bullet entered? Ernie the cat likes to sit on the top of the couch, too. What if I had been home sitting there? What if I had come home from work and found Peter shot -- injured or shot dead? What if? What if? The next day I stayed home and arranged to get the skylight boarded up, and to let in the ballistic police detectives to take their measurements. They concluded the bullet had been probably shot from the park across the lake (the same park where the high schoolers go after school to jump off the cliffs, the subject of another sermon last year), and then it soared across the lake and into our house. The gun was probably shot into the air, but bullets do come down eventually, and can travel over a mile apparently. Probably a gun accident, but who knows?

Deep fear was what I felt that day, and for several days later. Fear that something horrific could happen so out of the blue, and with such potentially deadly consequences. The same fear I felt at the hospital over the last year whenever something seemed potentially life threatening – going to the bathroom – talking to a staff member – entering the elevator – everything seemed risky there– and could be deadly. So much was unknown and out of our control. And people were dying – -- 571,000, of COVID, and 43,000 murders and suicide by gun violence (gunviolencearchive.org). According to the Statement from the Episcopal Bishops Against Gun Violence, this number is still the highest number of deaths in decades even with the pandemic. And now, with COVID-19 restrictions lifting, we have seen mass shootings return to bring horrible tragedies to people across America. Fear can be life altering -- it produces high anxiety – it can be paralyzing.

In an April 22, 2021 Washington Post story entitled: “Burned out by the pandemic, 3 in 10 healthcare workers consider leaving the profession”, journalist William Wan writes about a 48 year old physician who quit his job “last spring when fear began seeping into every part of his life...As he intubated COVID-19 patients last spring in his hospital, (he) kept imagining himself joining their ranks. He had asthma, high blood pressure and was overweight. He also had two young daughters and a wife he worried he might infect and kill every day he came home from work.”

And healthcare workers are not the only people who are suffering from increased mental health problems because of the pandemic, According, to the US Census Bureau, in December of 2020, 42% of people surveyed reported symptoms of anxiety or depression. In the previous year, 11% had reported the same symptoms. That translates to almost a 400% increase. (Nature.com – Feb. 3, 2021). This means the impact of the pandemic on our mental health could last for years!

Well today, as you heard from our readings, is Good Shepherd Sunday. It rolls around every year around this time, a time that always seems to be when all the hundreds of daffodils on the ridge behind our house are almost all out. Daffodils and sheep go together in my mind, probably due to my love of Wordsworth’s poetry, and any idyllic pastoral setting. The daffodil ridge I was looking at while I wrote this sermon could not have been more beautiful yesterday, and it aptly was an antidote for my journey back to my darkest COVID fears, and the “day the bullet fell.” When I first came to St. Francis and got to know everyone here, I knew that in order to be part of the St. Francis pack, I needed to do two things: 1) get a Westie dog; 2) learn how to garden. Animals and nature are so much of the most beloved things that define our great community. We did get a Westie, and while I have not become a true gardener yet, I did start off the daffodil ridge by buying and then planting about 50 bulbs (Peter did all the rest.). And, I was greatly assisted in this new undertaking by the wisdom of Beazie Larned and Alice Smith. God’s amazing creation of animals and nature of all varieties provided so much consolation to me, and I know to you as well during the darkest times over the past year. There was nothing more soothing than petting a furry friend, and taking a walk outside where nature seemed oblivious to the trials we were under.

And scripture too was always there as well to remind us of God’s protection and unconditional love for us particularly when things got dark and scary. When we provided tele-chaplaincy to COVID-19 patients and their families, and then made bereavement calls, there was always two things I kept handy – one was the 23rd Psalm, and the other was a link to the hymn Amazing Grace. Psalm 23rd was always the most requested scripture, and the words the most comforting. In our Gospel reading from John, we heard how Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will never desert his flock when the dark threat of the wolf, or potential evil, harm or death comes. Jesus, who knows us, will never leave us, and Jesus, who gave up his life for us will always be with us in the darkest of times to calm our fears. Jesus will be with us leading us beside the still waters, and the green pastures. And even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we need not fear, for Jesus, our Christ is always with us to protect and to comfort us, providing goodness and mercy all the days of our lives. This is the promise of Easter that we celebrate this Eastertide, and always.

As we are human, of course, we fear our human vulnerability to injury, illness, dying and death. Thankfully, most years of our lives this might seem hypothetical. This year was different, for sure. But through the words of Psalm 23, we are assured and promised God’s presence in our lives, particularly at the worst of times, and as we pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Forever with us, as a Good Shepherd cares and loves their sheep – now, and in the hour of our death. **Amen**