

They comfort me. Arguably the most comforting and inspiring of sacred texts: *“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...”* David wrote Psalm 23 some 3,000 years ago. Before he was a king, before he was a giant slayer, David was a shepherd boy with two indispensable tools. *“Your rod and your staff – they comfort me.”*

The shepherd’s rod was used as a club to beat off predators. The staff has a crook that is used to rescue a wayward sheep from a predicament. This pandemic is a time for us to rely on the Lord’s rod and staff. God will get us through this. That happens by warding off the virus with the rod of protective measures. It also happens by reaching out with the staff of God’s word that lifts us up and challenges us help one another in times of trouble.

Thy Rod. After six weeks of shut-down, people are restless, clamoring to re-open. They want to get back to work. They need an income. They need to get to church, to AA meetings, to school. We cannot go to movies. Even parks and beaches are restricted. We want it to end.

A rod that is soft is not an effective protective tool for the sheep or the shepherd. Its hard. But when the wolf – or virus - is going to kill those you love, hard measures protect you.

As I write this, Covid-19 has already killed nearly 200,000 people. More than 50,000 of those are from the U.S. This thing has killed more Americans in six weeks than Americans killed in the Vietnam War over nine years. This is deadly serious. Take it seriously. Love one another. Stay home.

Thy Staff. If the rod comforts by its hard defensive force, the shepherd’s staff comforts by gentle restoration to safety. You’ve seen the shepherd’ crook with its quirky curve. It is designed to lift and guide a fallen sheep.

I know many of us are hurting right now. We are stressed, bored, broke and sick. If we belong to the shepherd, sometimes we need lifting up when we are feeling down.

The spiritual quest is to find the ways that this disruption can be a gift. Can you embrace the stillness? The quiet? Let this be an opportunity for some spiritual reading and spiritual healing. Rediscover the lost art of writing letters. Read a classic. Meditate. Pray.

When the disciples were tired and worried, Jesus invited them to *“Come away to a deserted place and rest a while.”* (Mark 6:31) Perhaps our greatest challenge now is not merely to stay home, but to discover the blessing of staying home. Grant yourself the gift of a sacred retreat. Only you can choose to make it so.

When to Reopen. Nobody wants to stay on lockdown. We all want to reopen. Doing so requires mitigating risk, especially to the most vulnerable members of our community. St. Paul wrote, *“If one member suffers, all suffer together with them.”* (1 Corinthians 12:26)

It’s not about politics. It is about the convergence of science and compassion, with the rod and staff of the Good Shepherd guiding us to take good care of one another. We will open at a time and in a way that is safe. Until then, seek the blessing of this moment.