

Minister's Message May 1, 2020 (Sunday May 3)

Greetings friends!

Even in the midst of sheltering in place, we are not able to shut out the realities of life that continue around us and with-in our families.

This week we give thanks and celebrate the life of Bob Sorley and offer our love and prayers to Gloria and her family. "Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the gates of heaven to a place prepared for you." Our thanks to Rev. Roy for conducting a graveside service for the family.

We are also aware this week how this virus can touch us as it touches those we love. We offer prayers and support to Steve and Linda Hardaker. Steve's daughter-in-law Monica tested positive for Covid and his son Andrew will likely also be infected.

We also offer our prayers and support to Larry and Marianne McRae whose daughter Darragh and son-in-law and and grandson are coping with the virus while trying to isolate from the other children.

We pray that they will soon be well and that they be given the stamina they require to deal with it.

I also want to once again thank Steve for his incredible and capable leadership in this extraordinary time. He has become the glue or maybe a better word would be guiding light for the congregation's temporal matters. He keeps us informed about what's going on and is in constant communication with the members of the Church Board. The church continues to operate even though we cannot be there. Thankyou Steve.

I also want to thank you for continuing to support the church with your gifts. We know that some folks are experiencing hardship right now and cannot contribute. We want you to know that we are there for you.

Our Director of Music, Lisa Brillon has offered to provide a link to some music that will go out with this message each week. I know that will be very much appreciated.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrDnn4jsVZg>

The Message

This week I invite you to read John 10:1-10. If you don't have a Bible, I'll give you a synopsis.

John has Jesus say that if you see someone sneaking into a sheep pen without using the gate, you know they are up to no good. The gatekeeper, on the other hand, is known by the sheep. He calls them by name and leads them. They follow him because they know his voice.

The people had no idea what he was talking about, so he got specific. Look, I am the gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for. A thief is only there to kill and destroy. I became so they can have real and eternal life, a life far more and better than they could have dreamed.

The second reading is one with which you will be very familiar, so I share with you a contemporary version for a different perspective.

God is my pace setter. I shall not rush.

God makes me stop and rest at quiet intervals.

God provides me with images of stillness which restore my serenity.

I am led to new opportunities through ways of calmness of mind and God's guidance is peace.

Even though I have a great many serious concerns each day, I will not fret, for Holy Presence is near.

God's timelessness, God's all importance, will keep me in balance.

A refreshment and renewal is prepared in the midst of my way, by anointing my mind with oils of tranquility.

My cup of joyous hope overflows; surely harmony and peace shall be my refuge and I will walk with God and dwell in God's peace forever. (From a Japanese translation, adapted)

Few biblically inspired images are as enduring and essential to Judaeo-Christian tradition as the one who cares for the sheep, the shepherd.

Moses tended his father-in-law's flock of sheep when the burning bush interrupted his day and life. David, the King, was at first, the sling-shot wielding defender who protected sheep from wild animals and confronted Goliath.

Sheep are always present in any pageant portraying the birth of Jesus, that I have ever seen.

And so, it was and so it is, that all who follow Jesus, all who are part of the Christian heritage of servanthood and discipleship, can be known as cloven- hoofed, two-stomached, dim-witted, herd-oriented oft fleeced and frequently smelly.

Personally, I resist the sheep label. I've seen sheep sheered and honestly, I'd rather be the shearer than the sheered.

Aren't shepherds and sheep out of date anyway? Most of us have seen more pictures of sheep than spent time around them. Ask 10 younger city dwellers where wool comes from and they will probably tell you Amazon.

Some of you may be familiar with Garrison Keeler's take on the Christmas story. His version transformed the lowly Bethlehem-based shepherds into parking lot attendants. After all, how many marino or black horned sheep have you tended, compared to Hondas or Ford 150 pick-ups? Would you rather see yourself among Mustangs or Mercedes or medium-wool merino sheep?

And yet I am a sheep. Not in the worst sense, but the best. I don't have to have the wool pulled over my eyes, nor do I have to think of myself as sheepish. This ancient, even anachronistic reference, rightly defines and encourages my faith.

John describes Jesus not as a sheep, but as the gate for the sheep. Jesus becomes the door in and out of the pasture. The pasture of course is life-giving, the door to the source of food. It is also the door to safety and the end of the day. The story suggests, I think, that Jesus is the door to safety. Through this door come all those who have been considered to be outside the community, the disabled, the poor, the sinners. Jesus brings them back into community.

Lazarus, begging outside the rich man's gate – a woman about to be stoned outside the city walls – a man "possessed", chained up, away from the community - lepers wearing bells to warn the "normal" people that they are near the "abnormal".

In these stories, Jesus is the door, the gate to abundant life.

In verse 10 we hear, "I came, so that they may have real and abundant life, a more and better life of which they could ever dream."

Abundance has different meanings for different folks. We have been living in the midst of a culture that prized certain aspects of the abundant life: three car garages, granite counter tops, world travel, expensive cars, to name a few. You get the picture.

The Christian concept of abundant life and I dare say Jewish and Islamic, is something different.

The culture's abundant life is for the individual, it's all about me, while the religious concept focuses on community and the transformation of individuals, through community, to a developing relationship.

Somewhere along the years we, particularly in the western world, lost that idea that we are so interconnected and that we rely on each other world wide. Somehow, we lost the concept that when one suffers, we all suffer. When there is enough for all to share, we have abundance.

Perhaps it has come into clearer focus in the last few weeks. God willing, we can keep that concept alive and well when we move to the new normal.

Psalms 23 says that God preserves a flock, a large community. It reminds the community that in the midst of the darkest of valleys, devastation, despair, fear, illness, floods, tornadoes and pandemics, God is there.

Eugene Peterson in the Message paraphrase says in Psalm 23:

"You serve me a six course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head, my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.

I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.

The audacity of such hope! Wow!

It is God's companionship that transforms every situation. It does not mean that there are no deathly valleys, no enemies. It means that in the midst of all that, there is hope and beyond hope — abundant life.

And the people said.....

Will you pray with me...

God it seems that there is a lot of uncertainty around us, so many people who need prayers.

Today we pray for those whose health is compromised by the Coronavirus or other health issues.

We remember particularly Darragh and her family and Monica and her family.

We pray for those who suffer from the economic impact of the virus, in manufacturing, hospitality, small businesses and self-employed and many others.

For health care workers and first responders and other public servants who put themselves in harm's way for us.

For leaders of governments as they seek to manage this challenge.

God it can be so overwhelming, but you tell us over and over again not to be afraid. May we continue to trust in you.

We offer our prayers this day for those who mourn. In our own community. We pray for Gloria that she might be comforted. We remember all those whose lives were taken from them in Nova Scotia and we pray that your spirit may hold closely, those who loved them. We remember also the families of loved ones who have died from this virus which is among us.

Even as we know that you are with us in this unprecedented and unique time, we acknowledge how much we miss each other and we pray for the time when we are out of isolation and our fast of human contact is broken. Hold each one of us in your embrace. We ask these things in the name of the one who taught us to pray, Our Father.....

Benediction

Hear these words from #143 in More Voices

We cannot own the sunlit sky, the moon, the wildflowers growing,
for we are part of all that is within life's river flowing.

With open hands receive and share the gifts of God's creation,
That all may have abundant life in every earthly nation.

When bodies shiver in the night and weary, wait for morning,
when children have no bread, but tears and war horns sound their warning,
God calls humanity to wake, to join in common labour,
That all may have abundant life, in oneness with their neighbour.

God calls humanity to join as partners in creating
A future free from want or fear, life's goodness celebrating,
That new world beckons from afar, invites our shared endeavour,
That all may have abundant life and peace endure forever.
The peace of God be with you. Amen