

The Good Shepherd Sunday

May 3, 2020

Welcome/Announcements

Welcome today to the worship of God with McClure United Church on location at the McCorkell farm. As I was beginning to think about what I might offer for worship on this Sunday.. known as Good Shepherd Sunday...just as I had images of sheep floating around in my head.. I saw a post on Facebook from my friend Sarah sharing the good news of a new baby lamb... and I thought.. hmmm.

So a message later, here I am... its like a worship reality show – an experiential invitation to reflect on the biblical images of Shepherd. So thank you to Sarah and her family... husband Brett and children William, Evan and Logan... for welcoming me here today.

- Invitation to Friday morning coffee.
- Join Facebook group/Facebook live is happening M,W,F
- Phoning tree is active – if you consider yourself to be part of our church community and have not received a phone call and haven't been receiving weekly emails with updates, let us know.
- If you have other ideas of how we can reach those who are not connected online, please let us know

Opening Prayer

Thank you, loving God, for bringing us to this time of worship. May our time together today remind us again of the many ways in which you have blessed our lives with new life... with your abundant love and with your presence. Guide our hearts and our spirits... may we hear your words for us in this time together.

Theme Conversation

I want to share with you today a version of a very familiar Psalm. This is a reading often shared at funeral services and at other times when folks are needing some comfort... some reassurance.

But it is also an important passage for us to hear every day... a beautiful reminder of God's steady presence. God's love and care for each one of us.

This reading reminds us of the abundance that is all around us, even in our darkest, most challenging times.

So as I share this with you... and I'm reading a version from a children's version of the Bible.. as I read it, I invite you to imagine yourself in whatever place is your special place – a place where you feel safe... where you feel comforted... perhaps where you feel most connected to God. A place where you can breathe more deeply knowing that in that place, in that moment – you are surrounded by love.

As I say these words, perhaps you want to whisper them yourself... as an offering of gratitude for God's presence with you now... and always.

From the 23rd Psalm.

Lord, you are my shepherd. I have everything I need.

You give me rest in green pastures. You lead me to the calm water.

You give me new strength and you lead me on the right paths.

Even when I walk through a very dark valley,

I will not be afraid because you are with me.

Your shepherd's staff comfort me.

You prepare a meal for me right in front of my enemies.

You pour oil of blessing on my head.

You give me so much more than I can hold.

Surely your goodness and love will be with me every day of my life

and I will live in your house forever.

Scripture

A reading from The Message Version of the Gospel of John

"Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good—probably a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it."

Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of."

May God bless to our understanding these words from scripture. Amen.

Reflection

Having spent a little time with some sheep here, I'm not sure how I feel about Jesus comparing himself to the shepherd and us... his followers... to the sheep. I don't know how many of you are sheep experienced but... uh... they don't seem very bright.

And, yet, maybe that's the point of this metaphor... or one of the points.

Maybe Jesus was not only trying to explain something about himself... and his care for us... but also something about us.

Today is only my second time encountering sheep. The first was when I was walking The Camino in 2018. The Camino, for those who haven't heard me talk about it before, is a 800km pilgrimage across France and Spain - there are actually many paths on The Camino, but the one I journeyed on was this one... known as The French Way.

Anyway, on my second morning of walking, I decided to start off extra early... so that I could have some quiet, reflective time to myself... and so that I could get a good start on the day. At about 5am, while it was still dark, I started off along the path... which for this particular part of the journey was a narrow, mountain road. And about 15 minutes into my walk.. I came around a bend and discovered sheep... many many sheep... all across the road, up the mountain, down the mountain... they were everywhere. As I approached they all turned and looked at me, staring with a sort of blank expression on their faces. I asked them - quite politely - to move aside so I could pass - but they didn't budge. So I decided to just try walking through them with confidence - but my confidence... unfortunately... was nowhere to be found... so I decided I had no alternative but to sit on a big rock on the side of the road - drink my coffee, have a snack and wait.

After about 15 minutes or so, a white van pulled up and out came a shepherd... now he didn't look like the shepherds I imagine from the Christmas story... he was, just a normal looking guy... no t-towel on his head... no cane... just him and a dog.

The shepherd let out a few quick piercing whistles and the dog went to work gathering the sheep together and moving them down the mountain side. It was fascinating to watch and, as I watched, I couldn't help but think of Jesus and remember his stories of the shepherds caring for their flock... how they wouldn't leave even one behind. And I thought also of the 23rd Psalm... remembering those words "The Lord is my shepherd... I shall not want" and finding comfort in the reminder that God was with me - especially as I was setting out on this long anticipated journey... with a lot of excitement but with an equal amount of trepidation.

When I discovered that this Sunday... the Sunday in which it was my turn to offer a reflection... was The Good Shepherd Sunday... wellll...wheels started turning. While this Covid thing has created all kinds of barriers for folks to be able to gather together in our usual way.. it has also provided some opportunity to get a little creative in how we offer our worship on Sunday morning. So, when I saw my friend Sarah, posting images on facebook of her new baby sheep... I couldn't miss the opportunity for more of an experiential reflection time. So, I'm putting aside my cautious discomfort of farm animals... as I share this experience from the McCorkell farm.

The passage Sarah read for us a minute ago is a bit of a different take on the Good Shepherd than the parable of the lost sheep that I was remembering on my pilgrimage. In this passage, according to John, Jesus is warning against sheep thieves... those sneaking in through the fence with bad intentions. And in the second part of this verse.. he seems to shift the metaphor from he as the shepherd to he as the gate, allowing safe passage for the shepherd and the sheep to move through.

Whatever the metaphor... Jesus as shepherd or Jesus as the gate for the shepherd... I think the message is clear and it is right there in the very last line of the passage...

"I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of." In another version this line reads "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly".

And that's the message I needed to hear and one I wanted to share with you today... Jesus' message of abundant life.

I have found it relatively easy to notice the lack of abundance over these past few weeks...

lack of supplies - toilet paper, flour, yeast, hand sanitizer...

lack of face-to-face connection with family and friends...

lack of clarity of information - about the virus, about the impact.. the necessary precautions.. the plan for our future.

There has been a lack of abundance of so many things that many of us normally take for granted. And yet... the abundance of life is all around us. It has been quite amazing to me really...the way things seem to just be fitting together...

the resurrection story and its impact on Jesus' friends and followers...

the appearance of spring with its changing weather, sprouting crocus, reappearance of birds...

the literal birth of new life...

and the creative energy and life that so many people have been offering during this time of isolation and uncertainty...

people helping the more vulnerable... online communities forming... artists offering their musicals, plays, art classes, music lessons in new ways and often free of charge....

teachers finding ways to connect with the children and teens...

and churches challenging themselves to turn into reality what we have always claimed to be true.. that the church is not a building but the community - a community that has been going above and beyond to reach out and make sure God's love is being shared as widely and abundantly as possible.

Its like we have been forced to see in new ways. You might even say that where we once were blind, we now can see. How many of you have been forced to try something new over these past weeks that you maybe wouldn't have otherwise tried?

whether its finding creative new ways to do old things... or allowing this gift of time and freedom from our normal responsibilities to slow us down and be more present to the things in ourselves and our lives that need attention.

Just prior to this shepherd metaphor offered by Jesus.. we encounter the story of Jesus healing the blind man. He spit on some dirt, made some mud, and rubbed it into this guys eyes with instructions for him to then go wash it off. The man, blind from birth, was able to see.

I wonder about this man's "blindness"? Is this story about actual blindness... or is it about the kind of blindness we all fall into sometimes when we are unable to see

clearly some important information about ourselves... about the power of God's love... about the salvation offered to us in the resurrection story?

That world "salvation" gives some of us the heebygeebies... especially those that have had unfortunate encounters with the idea that our salvation is something we need to earn or is the result of some brutal sacrificial lamb of God theology.

But this story... the metaphor of the sheep... tells us a different salvation story. Nowhere in this metaphor does Jesus mention sin. And in the story of the blind man, Jesus challenges his disciples who are wondering if his blindness is the cause of sin. His blindness... Jesus tells them... is not because of sin but is so God's works will be revealed in him.

So salvation, we learn, in the sheep story, is about following the voice of Jesus... its about following Jesus' love and holding on to everything that love has to offer.

The scripture says.. "I am the gate... whoever enters by me will be saved"... and then immediately after says that he came that they may have abundant life.

Salvation is the eye opening... blindness removing... abundant life producing... love of God that comes to us in this story through Jesus the Christ.

So that is the challenge laid before us in this story... at least that's the challenge I heard... the challenge to open our eyes and look around... to acknowledge, experience and live the abundant life that is ours... ours to have and ours to share.

Now let us join our hearts together as one.. reaching through the distance between us... as we hold one another and ourselves in prayer... let us pray

Prayers of the People

O God, our souls.. our spirits.. our hearts are weary. The world is full of challenge.. struggles.. of pain. As people of love and compassion, it is impossible to not feel the ache of those around us. Many of us long for the days when life seemed simpler, safer; when we felt protected – comforted. It is in this spirit... that we come to you in prayer... seeking your comfort.. your peace... your hope.

The Psalmist wrote of green pastures and refreshing water... places of rest. Offerings of quietness and comfort for our thirsting souls. Lead our hearts there now, O God.. our shepherd. Lead us to a places where we can gather strength and healing, where we can prepare ourselves with confidence to be your presence.. your love in our world. You, O God our shepherd see us... you know us and you know our needs.

Thank you for hearing our cries.. cries for ourselves, for our loved ones.. cries for the world.. you hear those cries and in your great love... respond.

And today we cry for everyone who is struggling – with illness, with grief, with stress.. anxiety.. loneliness.. addiction. We cry for those facing discrimination, judgment... the outcast, marginalized and vulnerable. We breathe in your power and strength and breathe out our heart's desire for their healing and restoration.

God, may your abundant love anoint all who walk in the valley of darkness... filling them to overflowing with your peace. And may we all feel your presence within us and all around us... strengthening us, restoring us, healing us, challenging us to be all you have called us to be.

These prayers we offer and pray in the name of Jesus..

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil... for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory. Forever and ever. Amen.

Closing Blessing

There is room for all...

The shelter of God's love has no limits..

Trusting that truth.. let's remember the words of the psalmist. Placing our faith in the Shepherd... may we be led to those places of comfort.. of peace.. of healing

So that we can be filled up... Filled with the abundant love of God,

The strength of Jesus... And the energy.. the movement... of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.