



*Union with God
is the only heaven there is—
and it begins here on earth.*

—Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB

(d. 26 April, 2020)

GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY **4 May 2020**

Invitation to Prayer — Psalm 23

You are my shepherd,
I shall want for nothing;
You bring me to green paddocks for rest
and lead me beside still waters that renew my spirit.

Gathering Prayer

Shepherd of our souls and of our very lives:
awaken us to the light of your love
and raise us fully into your presence.
In our rest and our restlessness,
you have kept us safe through the night
and you open before us this new day
in which we might search for you
and love you.
Send your Spirit to us, we pray,
and illumine your dwelling place
within and among us.
For our hearts long to be one with you
now and forever.
Amen.

Scripture Reading — John 10:1–10

Introduction

In the chapter prior to today's reading, the Gospel tells of a man blind from birth who receives sight from Jesus. This healing causes no small amount of uproar within the village, ending with the man being driven out from the synagogue. What might be going on here?

In John's Gospel, blindness is a spiritual state. It represents one's inability to perceive Jesus as he reveals a God who is entirely love. According to John, this is a congenital disability—we are all born spiritually blind. But through Christ, we receive sight and can see the Presence of Love everywhere.

The story in John 9, then, is slightly contentious. It speaks into the painful divisions between Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah and those who didn't that erupted in the evangelist's time. It identified the reality of many in the beloved community—that is, they were being driven away from their familiar places of worship and its practices. The ability to maintain belief was increasingly difficult and the Gospel hopes to embolden the hearts of the beloved, encouraging them and us to remain faithful in uncertain and challenging times.

John 9, then, paints a picture of the way things are. In response, today's reading offers the comforting image of a shepherd who leads the sheep into pastures of abundant life. Here are two options for how you might savour this reading:

Option 1 — *Read the passage slowly three times. The first time read it for familiarity. The second time, read and notice or underline the word or few words that resonate for you right now. Hold one of these words in prayer for several moments, inviting the Spirit to speak to you through it. Read the passage a final time.*

Option 2 — *Read the passage one sentence at a time as you walk slowly, mindfully through your neighbourhood, garden, or along the beach. You might paraphrase each sentence in your mind as you meander. How does your journey illumine or speak into and out of what you are hearing in the Gospel?*

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Going Deeper

Choose the gate/door image below that best reflects your journey with God at this time. Don't over think it! The image to which we're drawn is often the "right" one for us. Spend several minutes getting to know the image, noticing details, taking in the shapes, lighting and mood.

- What, if anything, is the Spirit revealing to you through this image?
- What would you like to say to God about what has been revealed in this time?



Reflections in Solitude

You might read the reflection here or spend time in meditation or quiet reflection.

Prayers of Intercession

*“True solitude is deeply aware of the world’s needs.
It does not hold the world at arm’s length.” —Thomas Merton*

Source of Life, you who send rain on the just and the unjust, we are grateful for the countless ways you uphold creation. Thank you for the rising of the sun and its setting, for the air we breathe, the rhythms and seasons of Earth that provides us with all we need and more. In these days of necessary refrain, we are especially aware of the sustaining power of relationships, the joy that comes from friendly exchange, the healing potential in a loving touch. In the silence, we become aware of the gifts for which we are grateful...

We pray for those who are going through a dark valley at this time—those who are worried for the future, those who are burdened with responsibility, those who are downtrodden, in transition or depressed...

We pray for those who are experiencing difficulty as a result of the pandemic—those who are ill, those who are grieving and lonely, those who are living in strained or violent situations, those whose sense of identity or spirits are flattened for lack of activity and connection...

Finally, we pray for our world and the news that weighs heavy on our hearts...

Disciples’ Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.

Blessing

In touch once again with the deep love that surrounds and keeps us,
may we be assured that goodness and mercy will follow us all our days
for wherever we are, there a Great Goodness dwells with us.

The love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the communion of the Spirit be with us all.

Reflections in Solitude — Week 6

Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church

Two weeks ago, on a Sunday evening, fatigued with my own anxious quest for answers amidst the drone of speculation about the what, when and how of this pandemic, I turned to the familiar and consoling voice of Wendell Berry. I could have pulled any number of trusted companions from the shelf, but Berry is one of my oldest and dearest.

Since that evening, I have been reading Berry's collection of *Sabbath Poems* again. These poems, written by Berry on Sunday mornings, speak of the gifts some of us are unearthing during these slower, largely close-to-home days. Here's the beginning of one such poem written in the autumn of 1988:

*Always in the distance
the sound of cars is passing
on the road, that simplest form
going only two ways,
both ways away. And I
have been there in that going.*

*But now I rest and am
apart, a part of the form
of the woods always arriving
from all directions home...*



Like Berry's occasional Sabbath practice of sauntering through the fields and woods of his farm, many of us are spending more time outside where we are noticing the minute details in our gardens, having adventures in and marvelling at the rain, exercising, exploring and befriending places close to home. Some are cleaning neglected cupboards and sheds—not only stumbling across useful yet long-forgotten things, but also memories. Others are reaching out to give and care in new ways, discovering community beyond the bounds of familiar friends and family. And finally, hopefully most of us are growing in our realisation that church is not the building and worship is not just a Sunday morning thing as we weave moments of gratitude and prayer into our days, encountering the sacred everywhere.

As we begin to anticipate a return to freedom of movement, I hear both welcome relief and resistance. As a fellow Minister said this week, "I want more time for this new way of being to really take hold!"

It occurs to me that sometimes we feel as though we are victim to our schedules and actions. We speak as though the external demands and expectations are the drivers of our lives, as if we don't have a choice in the matter.

In John 10, a shepherding image is used to identify our vulnerability to competing claims and voices. Along with the beckoning of life we have moved towards recently, perhaps we have also heard the muttering of "thieves and bandits", voices inside and outside of us that lead to shadowy places of desolation.

These voices squeeze in through openings such as self-doubt and criticism, a lack of self-awareness or refusal to look closely at certain habits, attitudes and behaviours. However they make their way in, whatever their sound, these voices rob us of so much.

But like the sheep in the Gospel, we *already know* the Shepherd's voice. When we are attentive, *we can hear* the calling of the One who leads us toward the abundant life God intends.

Indeed, these weeks have highlighted for me what life could look like, not just for me but for others and for creation. I feel a strong invitation to move with greater intention towards that which leads to justice, peace, and love for all of creation.

My experience of turning to Wendell Berry has reminded me that voices that guide us well do not simply placate or sooth. They will not leave us as we are. In listening to Berry, I am stretched at times. For even as his familiar voice is comforting, Berry, like all wise companions, challenges and coaxes me beyond my comfort zones.

During Tuesday evening's Emergency Relief meal, for instance, one of our friends shared his experience of marginalisation. He spoke of the treatment some receive because, in his words, "we look different or act different." I gently asked if he had experienced this before. "Oh yeah..." he said, his eyes dropping and the conversation pausing as we sat with the hurt that had been revealed and my part in it at times.

Then we spoke about the possibilities for more life-giving ways of being—in particular at St. Andrews. As I asked him about his ideas, I gestured around the hall space where we were gathered in a circle eating.

Without hesitation, he said confidently, "This needs to be a place where everyone feels special. Each of us is unique, and when we treat one another that way, then we all feel welcome and there are no problems."

I am moved and challenged by his wise offering. I sense in it one of the many doors that are opening for me—for us—at this time.

"I am the gate." Jesus said. "Whoever enters by me... will find pasture." The tense of the Greek word translated as "find" is a vibrant one that denotes an ongoing action. It speaks of a discovery that is more expansive than when we locate our keys under a piece of paper on the kitchen bench. Rather, when we listen for the voice of the Living Christ—in creation, in others, deep within ourselves—there will be a continual encounter with the divine that is beyond expectation.

As our days pick up the pace, perhaps, and competing demands press in, may we have eyes and ears to see and hear the voice of True Life. May we have the courage to listen and follow into generous spaces within and beyond us that are always opening to deeper, truer love.

A poem about attentiveness and being alert to the Voice calling us to Life everywhere.

Sabbath Poem: 1987.I

by Wendell Berry

Coming to the woods' edge
on my Sunday morning walk,
I stand resting a moment beside
a ragged half-dead wild plum
in bloom, its perfume
a moment enclosing me,
and standing side by side
with the old broken blooming tree,
I almost understand,
I almost recognise as a friend
the great impertinence of beauty
that comes even to the dying,
even to the fallen, without reason
sweetening the air.

I walk on,
distracted by a letter accusing me
of distraction, which distracts me
only from the hundred things
that would otherwise distract me
from this whiteness, lightness,
sweetness in the air. The mind
is broken by the thousand
calling voices it is always too late
to answer, and that is why it yearns
for some hard task, lifelong, longer
than life, to concentrate it
and to make it whole.

But where is the all-welcoming,
all-consecrating Sabbath
that would do the same? Where
the quietness of the heart
and the eye's clarity
that would be a friend's reply
to the white-blossoming plum tree?

