

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, May 3, 2020

207 South Brodie St. Thunder Bay
<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca>

Words of Welcome

Still in the practice of social distancing you may find yourself lonely, out of sorts, bored, afraid, wondering "Is this all there is?" and "How do we go forward?"

Join with me as we spend some time together being in community, in a common time of worship. A time to be refreshed and renewed. A time for hope and knowing that even though the terrain is unknown God is not.

Call to Worship

Can you hear the voice of God?
Hear God calling you by name.
Are you troubled or distressed?
Come here to find a place to rest for awhile.
Come and find a guide who knows these lands.
Come to praise our God,
whose pathways and doors lead to life.

Adapted from <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/4940/worship-elements-may-3-2020>

The Hymn, The Lord's my Shepherd, has brought comfort to people since it was penned as a psalm written for worship in the Hebrew Community centuries ago. The tune is immediately recognizable as it too was written not as long ago, but still long enough to be ingrained in the hearts of minds of those who worship even now. May it bring comfort today....

Hymn

The Lord's my Shepherd

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| 1. The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want.
He makes me down to lie
in pastures green; he leadeth me
the quiet waters by. | 2. My soul he doth restore again,
and me to walk doth make
within the paths of righteousness
even for his own name's sake. |
| 3. Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
yet will I fear none ill,
for thou art with me, and thy rod
and staff me comfort still. | 4. My table thou hast furnished
in presence of my foes;
my head thou dost with oil anoint
and my cup overflows. |
| 5. Goodness and mercy all my life
shall surely follow me
and in God's house forevermore
my dwelling place shall be. | |

Words: public domain

Prayer is a gateway to God and the gate swings both ways. In prayer we share with God our hopes, struggles, joy and concern and God loves us in return, speaking back into our hearts and minds. Let us joy *our* hearts and minds in prayer.

Opening Prayer

Abundant God, you are the one we trust to guide and care for us in times of trouble. When life is overwhelming, or fear steals away our hope and joy, you come to us with the promise that we can and will recognize your voice calling us by name, bringing us to safety. We confess that at times we choose not to listen for you, or even trust you with what life brings us. Sometimes we are afraid that what you mean by life abundant could also mean that we must give up something of our material goods, or that we will have to forgive as you have forgiven. Guide us in this time of worship as we hear the scriptures read, songs sung, prayers spoken, and a message offered that we will know your desire for our lives, your hope for our todays and tomorrows, as we seek to live in relationship with you and those whose lives intersect with ours. We ask this in the life-giving name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

©Joyce Yanishewski written for the 4th Sunday of Easter, Year A. May 3, 2020.

Assurance of Pardon

Jesus said, I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.

Know that the shepherd of our lives never abandons us, is always calling our name, and unfailingly loves and forgives us.

<https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/4940/worship-elements-may-3-2020>

Scripture Reading John 10:1-10

“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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message Abundant Life

Facebook and Instagram have certainly been a source of entertainment for me the last few weeks. Sometimes one even sees a gem of wisdom like in the following post which says,

“Ok, but honestly, how privileged are so many of us that during a global pandemic we can just stay warm at home, reading, working, still being educated, creating, talking to our loved ones, with little worries and a fridge stocked with food? Do remind yourself to be grateful today.”

When I first read this, I felt strongly that it was so true and it is, but it still falls short of the fact that humans were meant to be in relationship and in community. I just finished writing a quick note to a friend saying that I am struggling because the hugs I have come to rely on to bring comfort, express love and compassion, and celebrate joy are just not part of my broader experience anymore. In another Facebook post I read, “check in on huggers, they’re not doing well.”

Social distancing of course is important and I am definitely restraining myself and following the guidelines, but it doesn’t make it any easier. The longer this goes on, the more challenging it becomes. I am noticing more and more of my conversations with people are about the isolation not so much about creativity or new learning. Life is supposed to be about living fully and when we cannot interact physically with one another a huge dimension of what it means to live fully as human beings is lost to us.

It is clear that social distancing practices will be here for some time, even as things slowly begin to open up and a few restrictions lifted. Still the restrictions around physical touch and any form of gathering that would encourage such behaviors will likely be the last things allowed. Everything from soccer, football, rodeos, fairs, choirs, church services, conferences, and concerts will take time and adjustment before it is again part of our living fully, at least in any sort of way that is reminiscent of just a few months ago. Our expectations around what it means to live an abundant life most definitely need to be reframed in this time of pandemic.

In Jesus’ last statement in the scripture reading today he says, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” These words were spoken to a crowd of both haves and have nots. People who had power, but also people who had little to no power. Some who had money and the necessities of life along with those who scratched out a meager existence.

The few verses in this text are actually part of a much larger dialogue and experience where a man born blind is given sight when Jesus heals him, but because those with worldly authority didn’t want to acknowledge Jesus’ power, the man is basically thrown out of the community that he has always known. Even his parents don’t really stand up for him for fear of retribution from those who can make life altering decisions for them.

So as was noted, in the midst of this story Jesus states, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” So, what does it mean to live an abundant life as it obviously has little to do with power, prestige, or wealth?

May I suggest that it includes feeling and knowing your life has purpose, one that serves the common good. It will likely also include participating in a community that shows compassion and restores people to relationship with others and with God. Abundant life delights in relationship. Abundant life gives a sense of security in knowing that God is with us through Jesus Christ no matter what goes on around us.

So how do we come to have or find this abundant life?

Often it comes through conversation and healing, through friends and family, through struggles and hardship. It comes when we begin to let go of self-reliance and realize that we are part of a bigger whole. Hashtags for weeks now have been #we’re in it together, or #stronger together but that is how the Christian community has always thought of itself and operated. In the story the blind man was loved and accepted by those following Jesus. He becomes a disciple of Jesus. He was restored to a community.

As Christians we are stronger together which is why not being together for Sunday worship and other work and celebrations is really breaking our hearts. We know we can worship God wherever we are, still that sense of being in relationship, of strength in community, is more tenuous when we are connecting via online worship or print media.

There are a few things that Jesus said that help us to understand our strength as a community in relationship with each other and Jesus. Jesus is at that moment talking a whole lot about sheep, a shepherd, a gate, and a gatekeeper. And without making it too complicated I think we can see how Jesus is the shepherd. It is an image that many of us grew up with. A shepherd has a special relationship with the sheep, and there is a provision of being guided, protected, a sense of security as sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd entrusted with the care of the flock. For us it means that we can trust Jesus to care for us, to be with us when there is danger, challenges, unfamiliar terrain. We are not alone.

But what of the image of the gate? Jesus said, “I am the gate.” In fact, he is recorded to have said it twice in just a couple of verses giving it emphasis.

A gate allows for movement from one space to another. In this case the safety of the enclosure to other areas. The words Jesus uses are “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” Now no one image ever fits completely, but when Jesus said “I am the gate” it seems to indicate he is a passage way. People find a safe place by passing through the gate to safety, still, it is not possible to remain there. We find ourselves going in and out through the gate and that is how it is supposed to be. In order to be with others who believe, and also to share God’s good news of grace, forgiveness, and love with others, we can’t stay in the safety of the

enclosure. We can't stay in the safety of our church or homes whether or not they have strong walls or just include email and a screen.

For God so loved that world that Jesus lived, died, and rose again. It was not so that a chosen and select group or groups would be the only ones to have access to God. This was so everyone would have the opportunity to be in restored relationships with their families, friends, with themselves, and especially with God.

Today we are distanced from each other, but God is still wrapping us in love, compassion, and grace. It is a gift, a gift from God freely given in order that the God who created us to be in relationship and who desires more than anything to be in relationship with each of us, with you, that relationship would be possible.

If you are in need of hope, love, grace, forgiveness, a relationship, it can be and is found in Jesus Christ. It takes faith to believe that promise, but that too is a gift from God. Faith is given to each person who takes hold of it and trusts, even when it seems unreasonable to trust. Once you trust even if you still have doubts, listen for Jesus, the shepherd, the gate by which we are granted access to God. Hear Jesus' voice calling you by name and leading you. Jesus is going ahead, preparing a way, and regardless of the terrain, the unknowns, the future, know that God's desire is that you may have life and have it abundantly! Amen.

Closing Prayer

Holy and gracious God, shepherd of our lives,
we come to you with thanksgiving for you are our provider and sustainer.
You transform our weary souls with your grace, wisdom and love.
You bless us each day with glimpses of resurrection and the promise of new life,
in signs of spring, in stories of kindness and perseverance during crisis.
Touch our hearts in surprising ways with we have in Christ Jesus.

Listening God, shepherd of the world, we bring you now our prayers for others. Hear them in your tender mercy:

We pray for people who are struggling with illness, loneliness, grief or sadness,
thinking especially of those whose lives have been redefined by COVID-19.
And we pray for those whose working life has been changed drastically by this
pandemic, thinking of health care workers, those in the food supply chain, and all those
whose jobs have disappeared. (*Silence*)
May each life be touched by the power of resurrection and new hope.

We pray for countries and communities where it is not safe for people to live out their
faith openly. (*Silence*)
May all people of faith be granted the freedom to praise without fear.

We pray for people in the world who are victims of discrimination and acts of hatred,
and remember those unjustly blamed for the outbreak of the pandemic. (*Silence*)

May your desire for justice be made known and lived out.

We pray for our congregation and all people who make up your Church, forced now to consider how to be faithful in difficult times. (*Silence*)

May we discover new ways to be your Easter people in the world.

We pray for our families, our friends and for ourselves. (*Silence*)

May each of us know the power of your compassion and promise.

We ask these things in the name of the Risen Lord who taught us to pray...

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Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, 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

Invitation to make an offering

In this season of Easter, we celebrate God's most precious gift to us in Christ's dying and his rising. In choosing to donate to any charitable organization, our generosity reflect God's goodness to us and the hope we have in Christ Jesus.

If you would like to make a donation toward the life and ministry of St. Andrew's Presbyterian in Thunder Bay visit our website at <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> for more information.

Hymn

Praise him, praise him, Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!

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1. Praise him, praise him, Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!
Sing, O earth, his wonderful love proclaim!
Hail him, hail him, highest archangels in glory;
strength and honour give to his holy name!
Like a shepherd, Jesus will guard his children;
in his arms he carries them all day long.

Refrain:

Praise him, praise him! Tell of his excellent greatness;
praise him, praise him, ever in joyful song!

2. Praise him, praise him, Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!
For our sins he suffered and bled and died;
he, our Rock, our hope of eternal salvation,
hail him, hail him! Jesus the Crucified.
Sound his praises! Jesus who bore our sorrows,
love unbounded, wonderful, deep and strong.

Refrain

3. Praise him, praise him, Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!
Heavenly portals loud with hosannas ring!
Jesus Saviour, reigneth forever and ever;
crown him, crown him, Prophet and Priest and King!
Christ is coming, over the world victorious;
power and glory unto the Lord belong.

Refrain

Praise him, praise him! Tell of his excellent greatness;
praise him, praise him, ever in joyful song!

Words: public domain

Benediction

May God lead you to places of rest and renewal;
May Christ accompany you on the journey;
May the Holy Spirit fill your hearts with joy and generosity;
And may the blessing of God Almighty,
Creator, Christ and Spirit, descend upon you
and dwell in your hearts this day and always.

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