

Good Sunday morning from a cloudy (yes, again!) hill in Rockport....

No “Spring meditation” went out yesterday! Some days “sheltering in place” takes more energy than other days. Have you noticed how the days and nights begin to run into one another like a fog that lightens up and then thickens again. You know that type of fog if you drive. The road ahead is foggy, then all of a sudden it’s clear, and then again all of a sudden, it’s so foggy you can’t see the road right in front of you, and then it’s clear again. Sometimes the days and nights are running together as in a fog in this pandemic time. Depending on the particular news of the moment, it feels like the fog is thickening again, or at times like it is briefly lessening and there’s clarity for a moment. To say that this is a strange and foggy time in all of our lives is an understatement.

We do not know how long we will be away from worshipping together on Sunday mornings in our sanctuary. We have to wait until this virus fog lifts so we can see the days ahead more clearly than we do right now. This is not our choice, but it is our current reality. There are some in our country who would angrily deny that reality. They want their personal lives back NOW, not later. They do not want to wait.... None of us want to wait. But the Bible, and our very existence remind us that living itself is a waiting game. From the time we are formed in our mother’s wombs to the moment we take our last breaths, we wait for the next move, the next turn to our existence. Wait with me. Be patient with me. Be the church with me. Pray with me. Do for others with me. Love God and one another with me....

Blessings to all this Sunday morning as we wait to see what this day and the next will bring to us.... Susan

A simple online worship service for Sunday, May 3, 2020
The 4th Sunday of Easter
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston



Opening Prayer

We gather as followers of Jesus --
in written word, not in person, this day.
We do our best to embody Jesus’ love and guidance
showing us how to be the very presence of God.
May our faith deepen beyond personal piety and mere tradition
to become the story we tell with every breath of our lives.
Amen.

A Prayer of Confession and Words of Affirmation
Based on Acts 2:42-47 & adapted from a prayer in *Seasons of the Spirit*

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching,
to the community, to shared meals, and to prayers.
Yet when we disagree with others’ teachings we put them down;

*we think they are wrong;
we do not want to join them in a meal, or pray with them.*

*A sense of awe came over everyone.
Yet we are too often skeptical, reluctant to see
God's presence in our everyday lives.*

*The believers were united and shared things.
They would sell property and possessions and
distribute them to those who were in need.
But how can we tell who is really in need?
So many people want to rip us off.
They might say they are in need, but I'm not so sure.*

*They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone.
But sometimes I'm tired and I don't want to live in a way
that models God's goodness. I only want to focus on me.*

*Forgive us, God, when we are more concerned with ourselves
than with our wider community.
May we remember that though we are sometimes like straying sheep,
we can always return to the teachings of our sacred ancestors,
and know that our sins are forgiven.*

Amen.

A Reading of Scripture – 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. 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.”*

John 10:1-10

A sermon based on John 10:1-10 “Abundant living”



Will you pray with me. O God of abundant life, we come together this morning, not in person, but surely in spirit, to learn of your abundance and to share it with one another from a distance – in written word and through a computer screen. Help us to find the abundance you would have us seek this day in whatever form it might take. Amen.

This Sunday is sometimes called “Good Shepherd Sunday” in the Christian calendar – it is the Sunday on which we hear about Jesus as “the good shepherd” from the Gospel of John.

While this passage brings us some of the most comforting words of all of scripture, the images it presents are not always as familiar to our modern ears and eyes as they would have been to the rural dwellers of Jesus’ and John’s times. “For early Christians, struggling to discern the voice of the Shepherd amidst competing religious and political authorities, this image of Christ as the good shepherd was powerful. It is Christ as *the good shepherd*, rather than the *crucified* Christ or Christ *triumphant*. It is among the earliest images of Jesus painted on the walls of the ancient catacombs.

Moving from one metaphor to another, John also characterizes Jesus as the gate to the sheepfold. It is through Christ that his followers come to know safety and security, nourishment and rest in God.”¹

But some of the Bible’s more “rural” illustrations, like the use of shepherds and sheep, do not always translate well into our modern life – most of us don’t keep sheep, although here in Maine a fair number do! I remember some years ago when I was preaching from this text, I tried to relate to sheep herding, and sure enough, someone came up to me after the service to correct some of my “city observations” about sheep and how they act in life! So I’m not going to go there this morning and further reveal my lack of familiarity with farm animals and their tending.

Instead, I want us to focus on abundant life. The final verse of our passage from the Gospel of John this morning has Jesus saying, “*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*” (John 10:10) In one short, direct sentence, those words sum up why Jesus was born; how he lived, taught, ministered, and healed; and the reason he died and came to be followed by Christians as the messiah, the risen Christ. “*I came that they may life, and have it abundantly.*”

Simple, but powerful words. Here’s three questions for the day: What is abundant life? What is the kind of life Jesus came to foster? And what’s so abundant about it?

Jesus says he “came to offer ‘LIFE’ – one of those one-syllable words, swollen with meaning, that John threads throughout his gospel.”² The Gospel of John differs markedly from the other three gospels that tell of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection. “The other gospel writers focused on events, following Jesus through the bustling marketplaces and villages. Unlike them, John assumed his readers knew the basic facts about Jesus. Instead of focusing on facts, John mulled over the profound meaning of what Jesus had said and done. [As one commentator has stated it], the Gospel of John reads as if it were written under a great, shady tree by an author who had lots of time for reflection.”³

So we hear the words, “*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,*” and John, I think, would want us to stop for a moment before we move on to the next sentence, the next paragraph, the next image, the next powerful metaphor. I believe John would want us to reflect about the meaning of abundant life, as if we were sitting under that great shady tree with him.

One particular verse of the 23rd Psalm, which is the assigned Psalm reading for this particular Sunday, gives us a starting point. It is the second half of verse five of the 23rd Psalm. Various translations it goes – “my cup runneth over” in the King James Version, “my cup overflows” in the New Revised Standard Version and the New International Version, and “my

¹From *The Whole People of God Weekly Worship Resources* for April 21, 2002, p. 35.

²*The Student Bible*, NIV, notes by Philip Yancy and Tim Stafford, p. 1114.

³*Ibid.*, p. 1099.

cup brims over” in the New Jerusalem Bible. In the very modern interpretation from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, it reads “my cup brims with blessing.”

Abundant life can be one’s cup of nourishment – in all of its spiritual and physical forms – running over, filled to overflowing, more than enough to meet all our needs, and beyond what we could ever dream of and hope for. Some years ago I asked a good friend of mine who has been wheel chair and hospital bed bound for years with a debilitating disease what the words “abundant life” meant to her. She looked at me and said with no hesitation, “Being alive.”

What is “abundant life” for you? We live in a world and a society in which all too often abundance has meant more money, more clothes, a bigger house, a new computer, or two, two or three TV’s – one for each room we spend our time in, and one for a “camp by the lake” or a “condo at the beach.” Abundance, in all of its physical and monetary and secular manifestations, has become both the bringer of great good and the source of overwhelming evil and growing separation between the “haves” and the “have nots” in our society and around the world.

And yet.... we are currently in a situation worldwide that has brought us to our knees, physically and economically, no matter how much money we have or how many luxuries we enjoy. A virus has changed the channel of life which many of us have been watching and enjoying for many years. For others among us, this virus has revealed in new forms the dramatic and unpleasant disparity, the lacking of abundance, that the rest of us have taken for granted for too long.

This virus is a great leveler – it knows no boundaries, it takes away life and livelihood. It has brought us disruption and despair in our personal lives.

It has brought us to angry demonstrations in the streets while people continue to die in hospitals for lack of breath.

But it has brought something else. It has brought some of us to a new understanding of abundance, not measured in things and dollar signs, but in care for and care about one another.

Who among us knew face masks would be something we would begin to share in abundance?

Who among us knew ringing bells and singing from balconies and porches would signal our thanks for medical personnel and other service workers instead of sounding on Sunday mornings and for holidays?

Who among us would have ever thought the abundant life Jesus came to offer us would reach us in new ways because of a deadly virus?

Striving each day to live abundantly.... Is there any other goal more worthy of our attention? Let the people say, “Amen!”

To hold in our prayers this day.....



From our most recent bulletin and more....

Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Eve Anderson, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel’s grandson Jared, and Jackie’s 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali.... and all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus. *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

A Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, May 3, 2020

from the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church

**and written by Rev. Taesung Kang, New Hampshire District Superintendent
based on Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, and John 10:1-10**

Our Shepherd of every hope,
as we gather this morning in our own [home] sanctuaries, [in written form and] virtually
connected with each other in the presence of the Holy Spirit,
Help us to praise you for all the blessings that we have in the midst of all the negatives.
Let your people realize that you guide us throughout our lives as our Good Shepherd,
let your children learn to lean into the relationship we have with you and with each other.
Forgive us when we do not pay attention to your voice and guidance,
forgive us when we do not spend enough time with you even as we so desperately need it,
forgive us when we do not trust you when the worries of life lead us into despair and impatience.

Assure us that you are our constant companion, ready to forgive, and able to lift all our burdens.
Assure us that you are beside us.

When loneliness creeps in, fill us with the warmth of your love,
when sadness is unbearable, embrace us with your gentle comfort,
when our pain is severe, soothe us with your healing power,
when depression darkens the soul, touch us with your eternal joy.

Call us out from the darkest valley,
call us out from the many dangers, the fear of contraction and an uncertain future,
call us out from the turmoil of this viral disease,
call us out from the survival mindset of institutionalized religion.

Call us to rededicate ourselves to the essence of the Church,
call us to live out a radical Christian life as they did in Acts 2,
call us to be a sign and affirmation of hope for a disoriented world,
call us to redefine the Church post-Coronavirus,
call us to reach out to the world with new possibilities, expressions, and forms of
communication,
call us to praise you with great joy and demonstrate your goodness to everyone,
call us to “have real and eternal life, more and better life than [we] ever dreamed of.”

Amen.

A Benediction



May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face radiate upon you and flood you with grace and tender mercies.

May God smile upon you always and cover your life with peace.

Amen.

**Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)
for next Sunday, May 10, 2020**



Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Words to ponder today, from *The Old Farmer's Almanac, the Sunday edition*

“Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with what there is.” ~ Ernest Hemingway, 20th century American journalist & author