

Gateway to Abundant Life

A Sermon by **Rev. Laurie McKnight-Walker**

Biblical References: Psalm 23, Acts 2:40–47, John 10:1–10

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Will and I are blessed in our lives to have known someone whom we would consider to be a true embodiment of the values and characteristics of the Good Shepherd. It happens to be the godfather of our son Luke, who stood with us as Luke was being baptized some 17 years ago. The man's name is Mervin Lush and he was a steward, a member of the Ministry and Personnel committee and a good friend from my first charge in Grey County, Walter's Falls and Temple Hill.

Mervin was a man steeped in the worship life of his congregation at Temple Hill, one of those people you could depend on to get up at six in the morning to have the parking lot plowed when 10 feet of snow were dumped through the night. Merv was the first person who taught me the importance of keeping the bricks on your church wall well pointed. He kept me abreast of the news in the community that I needed to know, and some that I didn't, whether it was uproariously funny or down right tragic, and how to approach some of the more difficult church members, or when to leave well enough alone, and when to just sit down and have a good laugh or a cry or sometimes both. Merv was the first person to tell me how you were supposed to bless a cemetery at the annual outdoor service and how you should never use Ezekiel 37, the story about the dry bones rising up from the grave the way a Baptist preacher once did.

He was a man who loved the earth and knew how to get things to grow out of the rocky soils of Grey County, showing me how to get the first crop going (which was actually just plain ordinary dirty rocks), where the best trees were to tap for maple syrup, and how close we were to our animal cousins, the pig. He allowed me to grieve with him when he had to give up his herd of pigs, and cattle when the market forces and banks were ganging up on our Canadian farmers across Ontario.

Out of the suffering, Mervin and his wife Muriel showed me what it meant to raise the cry of justice, organizing local churches, our whole United Church of Canada, and local politicians to come to the defense of Canadian agriculture before it was too late and to help put into place an important support network for farmers who were about to give up completely. They made the connections for me with the farmers in the Developing World who were suffering the same injustice. Even as his own farm began to dwindle and suffer he continued to serve the global community by sowing a field for the Canadian Food Grains Bank which provides grain for the hungry.

Mervin was someone who took scripture seriously, but not literally, who would claim that he 'couldn't carry a tune in bucket', but sang every hymn with gusto, a man who lived out his faith, not only in the church, his family, as a good neighbour, but served in municipal politics for many years as well. More than anyone else, Merv taught me, what it meant to be a pastor, a shepherd of the flock. I know this may sound a bit like a eulogy, and maybe it is, because our good friend, an important disciple in the United Church of Canada that you should know about, passed away about a month ago and rests in the green pastures of Grey County and in the arms of our loving God. He was someone who showed me what it means to love with a shepherd's love, to model your life on this image of God.

The 23 psalm is often associated with funerals, but really it is a psalm about life, about how we can find abundant life by being in relationship with our God, who is here described as the shepherd who provides for all our needs – “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Just that first line, in and of itself, conveys such a sense of trust, and a knowledge of God as one who cares, protects and sustains us throughout life.

Throughout the Old Testament, various writers used the image of the shepherd to describe the rulers of Israel. They were called to be shepherds to the people of God, to care especially for the weaker members of the flock, to watch over them, guide them, ensure they had all that they needed to live abundantly. Initially the shepherd was a political image for the ideal ruler, a far cry from the image of a dictator, who rules corruptly, exploiting their people to meet their own selfish greed, feeding their own need for more and more power and control. Images of this latter kind of leadership abound in our world still today.

It is no wonder that the story of the Hebrew's beloved King David beginnings were as a young shepherd boy, the youngest of his brothers, who was anointed by God with the spiritual qualities and authority to rule God's people as a shepherd King. If he would ever want to remember what it meant to rule like a shepherd King, to wield his power for the good of the people, he would only have to read the 23rd Psalm, where the qualities of the shepherd God were found. If we were ever to forget what it meant to lead our congregations, or how to give leadership in our families, to lead at work, or in our communities, we also can refer to the words of this well loved psalm which nourishes the heart and the mind.

The shepherd God made sure his people had enough of the simple necessities, providing for people a place of nourishment and safety. The morale of the flock is important, attending to the places in the soul where people become discouraged and thirsty. When the text says "he restores my soul", the Hebrew word for 'soul', nephesh, does not mean 'spirit' but means 'life' or 'vitality'. In other words, there will be support through the difficulties in life that a person experiences and he or she will be restored. Again the shepherd leads the flock on what appears to be moral or spiritual pathway. "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." This does not refer to the moral behaviour of the flock but, rather, it is about guidance, to be led in the right direction, on a safe and clearly marked track. It is akin to following the tracks of wagon wheels in the wilderness, or for us, a snowmobile track in a snowstorm. The shepherd will provide the 'signposts' that will keep the flock from straying 'for his name's sake". God can be none other than faithful and loving in this task.

During the dark times of life – illness, grief, hardship, struggle, confusion, referred to as the 'darkest valley', God will provide comfort and compassionate support. It is no wonder that those who face the fear of death itself, for generations, have found comfort and strength in reading this psalm, especially having it written upon their heart.

A new image is presented by the psalmist of God as the gracious host who spreads an abundant table before us, reminding us again of the importance of hospitality as one of the ways that God's realm becomes a reality. As God welcomes us to the table we are reminded again that we are anointed with oil, anointed for a purpose, strengthened to serve with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. King David was anointed by the power of the Holy Spirit as a young shepherd boy to soon rule the people of a nation as a shepherd king.

We too are anointed at our baptism and again at our confirmation with the gifts of the Spirit in order that we might use our gifts and talents to serve others with a shepherd's love. It is both a great honour and also a responsibility. Yet the psalmist is clear that to live with such a sense of purpose in one's life, with an awareness of the presence of the divine in our being, gives to us a sense of abundance, and blessing, a sense that life is overflowing with goodness and wonderful opportunities. What a blessing to imagine oneself to be in partnership with God and with other people who share this journey throughout one's entire life.

Wesley and Phaedra, as young people who have been anointed this morning with the waters of baptism, the laying on of hands confirming the gifts of Spirit that are alive in you, I know that our God will continue to bless in you your gentleness, your gifts of intelligence and sensitivity, your compassionate and thoughtful natures, your imaginativeness and in your willingness to serve. Each of you is uniquely loving and will be uniquely blessed by God who first loves you as you continue to grow in faith, character and leadership. Each of you, because of the depth of your character, in your own

way, is a leader. This church, the community of faith here at Queen St., has been truly enriched by welcoming you into this congregation as full members of the church.

In John's gospel, we expect John to speak of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, which he does in verses that follow our reading today, but instead he presents us with a curious image – Jesus as the gateway, the gate which swings inwardly for the shepherds to bring their sheep to come into a place of safety and nourishment, and the gate which swings wide open to allow the shepherd and his or her flock to go out into the world for discovery, service and adventure. We are called to be shepherd leaders, to love with a shepherd's love.

Our stained glass window at the front of the chancel reminds us of the Jesus who stands at the doorway and knocks, waiting for us to answer, to open the door or the gate, which we know is the gateway into abundant life. This is the time in which we stand at a new threshold of change, as we share the new journey of faith with Phaedra and Wes, and also in the life of our church, and our society, but taking with us these rich images of what it will mean to love with a shepherd's love.

Prayers of the People

Shepherding God, giver of abundant life we praise you this day
for you sustains us, guide us, protect us, from our beginning to our ending,
providing signposts, doorways, prodding to keep us on the right path, the path of life.

As we discover your holy life-giving presence within us, day by day,
we shall live without want or desire but find our souls, our vitality,
sustained and replenished with hope and purpose.

Today we welcome Wes and Phaedra into the fold,
rejoicing in their decision to follow the spiritual path as disciple of Christ.
We pray, O gracious God, that you will continue to guide them, encourage them, comfort them
throughout their lives always welcoming them to your table of blessing and abundance.
May they always be faithful, rejoicing as they grow in their loving relationship with You O Christ.
May each of us be formed more deeply by the wisdom and mercy of Christ and the Spirit with us,
becoming signs of hospitality and compassion ourselves.

In hope and compassion we offer our prayers today
for those who walk through a dark valley where grief darkens the path ahead,

where illness, or surgery leads to greater physical and emotional fragility
where emotional distress leads to confusion and fatigue
where scarce resources leads to fear, hunger and need
for those who stand before the doorway of death itself, bring peace.

You spread the table of life before us O God, revealing to us abundance of options, solutions to difficult problems, a way forward in the darkness, the oil of healing and gladness for our suffering, providing other companions who also share this road, this house with us.

We praise You O merciful shepherd God, for on this journey of life, we are never alone.
Breathe your nourishing Holy Spirit within us as we pray in one voice....Our Father....