

SHEPHERD IN THE CITY April 25, 2021 Grace Mennonite Church

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” John 10:11-18 NRSV

The 12th century mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, known for her visions that evoked other-worldly musical pieces, was actually a very ‘down to earth’ thinker. She experienced various hardships and was well-aware of the austere and often severe living conditions of the people around her. Her wonderfully stirring songs and prayers continue to move our lives today with a sense of purpose and great hope, even in the hardest times – such as this ongoing period of world history we are enduring under the threat of a global pandemic.

With the reality of uncertainty caused by COVID-19 heavy upon our spirits, we seek inspiration to persevere through these times and to be enlivened with inner peace and an active faith. To help with that, let’s focus today on Jesus the Good Shepherd. I begin this reflection with one of Hildegard’s short prayers, called “O Shepherd of Souls”:

O Shepherd of souls
and o first voice
through whom all creation was summoned,
now to you,
to you may it give pleasure and dignity
to liberate us
from our miseries and languishing.

No question, this pandemic pressure cooker period is possibly one of the hardest life experiences many of us have struggled through. For those who are older and who witnessed the effects of World War II (or, if older still, were touched by the exigencies of the Great Depression), current experiences of worry, fear and sorrow

are not new. COVID-19 is another huge challenge, of course. But, the longer we live, the more we are aware that life journey experiences include “the valley of the shadow of death” as the 23rd Psalm confesses. Think of the deeply personal songs that have been written as versions of this famous “Shepherd Psalm” – with words that are so comforting and encouraging. Our mind’s eye sees a picture of sheep in a mountain valley, perhaps, with a wise, strong shepherd providing a guiding presence for security and protection.

But what a different energy exists in the John 10 scripture text I read! We see the snarling wolf; we imagine the ‘couldn’t-care-less’ hired hand running for cover, leaving the sheep to *bleat* and *baa*, likely to bleed and be eaten raw! Against those savage images Jesus offers himself as a sure and present help in time of trouble. He tells listeners – two thousand years ago, and today – that he “lays down his life” for the sheep. For all the sheep.

Debie Thomas, a fine writer who publishes weekly in a website called “Journey with Jesus”, said this week: “The more I read John 10, the more gritty and challenging it sounds. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus loves the obstinate and the lost. He lives at the edges of polite society, out in the wild, untamed places of the world. His life remains perpetually in danger... Because he’s in it for the long haul, he not only frolics with lambs, but wrestles with wolves. He not only tends the wounds of his beloved rams and ewes; he buries them when their time comes.”

This image of a rough-and-ready Shepherd prepared to do everything it takes for the sheep is what we need to focus on when we think about great challenges in our personal lives or in what we often call “the world situation.” I’ve called my talk today “Shepherd in the City.” We often picture Jesus as the image of gentleness we carry in contemplation while on a walk in a garden or out in the country. In fact, where we need to experience the Shepherd is in the crash and crush of the hard, often cruel, things of life. In the complexity of the world... from our own challenges in family, work or neighbourhood relationships through to our struggles with understanding local to global politics - with all of the threats posed by self-absorbed, peace-and-justice denying leaders or nations. We don’t live in quiet countryside hideaways, even in our somewhat secluded safe Niagara. We are citizens of an often dangerous or at least very discouraging world. We need Jesus to help us in the ‘city streets’ of our world-wanderings, of our wondering or worrying about what is safe and right and good and true.

But nothing I’m saying is new. Think of Jesus’ own experience. Not long after he shared his promise to be that Good Shepherd, he was rounded up by wolves and

torn apart by the teeth of whips and nails, not to mention false accusations from those who might well have cheered for him earlier that same week, and left to hang butchered there on a tree at the time we now remember as the Passion Week leading to Easter. Right now, we are half way between Easter and Pentecost in the Christian calendar. We can still picture Jesus' execution just outside the city.

Soon, at Pentecost, we'll imagine how God's Spirit enters the city to inspire and lead followers of Jesus to cover the planet with the Good News. In fact, we are naming as a theme these weeks that "Good News is Springing Up." The Good Shepherd who was slaughtered for the sheep becomes the Spirit of Vision for us to live to care for all of God's sheep. So, we live today - in spite of the menace of a pandemic or the discouragement of any other challenge in life - in a season of mission. In fact, when we contemplate the fuller biblical vision of what is called "God's Kingdom (or kin-dom) theology", we realize we are being shepherded always forward toward "the city of God" where there will be healing and peace for all the peoples of Earth. We are safe and secure when we stay firm in owning and serving the work of Jesus in the world.

Now, having said that Jesus is the "Shepherd in the City", I want to direct our attention for a moment back to the natural world of the countryside and forest and wilderness. Thursday, April 22nd is Earth Day, a day to remind us that every moment we should be aware of the planetary challenge of potential Earth destruction. This past week my attention was riveted on this theme when I discovered a wonderful piece of writing by Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, in her book *Rooted & Rising*, in which she calls us to active prayer for Planet Earth. She strongly recommends that we spend as much time outdoors as possible so that we can sing our grief to the trees. She says: "I sing my fury about the predicament we're in as a species. I sing my protest of the political and corporate powers-that-be that drive forward relentlessly with business as usual, razing forests, drilling for more oil and fracked gas, digging for more coal, expanding pipeline construction, and opening up public lands and waters to endless exploitation, as if Earth were their private business and they were conducting a liquidation sale."

I believe a practical application of my reflection piece today would be that listeners would resolve to become more informed about development right here in our beloved Niagara Peninsula, in order to influence our politicians and community leaders to pay attention to the plight of the Earth!

This writer goes on: "I sing out my shame to the trees, my repentance and apology for the part I have played in Earth's destruction and for the part my ancestors played when they stole land and chopped down the original forests of the Native peoples

who lived here.” So, here’s another track to be taken in response to this call to Shepherd the Planet... actively enter into ways to support indigenous peoples’ concerns.

Finally, Margaret Bullitt-Jonas writes: “So our prayer may be noisy and expressive, or it may be very quiet. It may be the kind of prayer that depends on listening in stillness and silence with complete attention: listening to the crickets as they pulse at night, listening to the rain as it falls, listening to our breath as we breathe God in and breathe God out, listening to the inner voice of love that is always sounding in our heart.”

When we think of Jesus the Good Shepherd, whether we picture him inside or outside of an urban context, we can be assured that in no way is he put off by the noise of the world. He is with us in the complexity of life. He helps us realize there is no place that is not at the heart of the Presence of God.

We lament dangers and changes in our world. But we need to repent where we allow our fears or even our sorrows to cause us to hide from our mission to counter those dangers and adjust to the changes with God’s love... the love of a Good Shepherd. We are called to love the strangers that have come to our country, the refugees who are now newcomer neighbours. We can welcome them into our own homes. We are called to love our children and grandchildren in their post-modern lives where church and faith as we have lived it is not their experience anymore... perhaps they have something to teach us. We are called to love the earth – every tree, every creature, and every breath we ourselves take – because this is home. This is life. This is God’s gift to us. And to all who come after us.

It helps to picture God’s grace and presence as a Good Shepherd, whether we are thinking of some kind of personal provision or public protection as we live our individual lives in the “global city.” It’s God’s city. And we need God’s real presence in our lives. We need the Shepherd.

What can be better? Paying attention to nature, to spiritual wisdom, to each other, and to all of our neighbours who share the planet, we can be enriched by the green pastures and still waters of God’s presence, so that we can face into the wolf-teeth of the tough challenges of our lives in this shocking, strange, yet always exciting and potentially life-transforming 21st century.

Yes, we have a Shepherd even in the city of our insecurities and our sometimes sense of helpless confusion, exhaustion, frustration or fear. This Shepherd is good, faithful, and full of love and light. Today, we can renew our vision to be guided, and provided for, by this one named Jesus. As Hildegard von Bingen sang, “all creation is summoned by this Shepherd of Souls!” What do you and I hear in that voice today?