

Sermon for Earth Day Sunday April 25 2021 *The Rev. Mary Bell-Plouffe*

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Is there any more beloved passage in all of scripture?

It was written 3000 years ago, and is attributed to King David, who if you remember, was a shepherd himself in his early days.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

How many people have prayed this psalm in these 3000 years?

It's prayed by Jews and by Christians.

And I think that for those who pray it, it's not a one off deal.

I think that people who pray this psalm, pray it many many times during their lifetime.

I wonder how many people right now, right this instant,

All over the world, are praying this psalm?

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

This is a beloved psalm, but it's not a polyanna psalm.

It doesn't look at the world through rose-coloured glasses.

It offers comfort -*I shall not want;*

green pastures;

he restoreth my soul.

But everything isn't a rose garden.

There's the valley of the shadow of death; there's evil.

This psalm looks at life realistically -- it's a prayer for living.

I know that when I'm called to the hospital when someone is very ill or dying,

or when I'm going to visit a family that's had bad news

this is the prayer that is on my lips and in my heart.

It grounds me; it roots me; it reminds me who I am, and whose I am.

Praying this psalm calms my anxiety and assures me

that whatever I have to face

I am not facing it alone.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

In our gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the 'Good Shepherd'.

Where did he get this self-understanding?

There's lots of shepherd imagery in the Hebrew scriptures.

Surely this psalm must have been part of his formation.

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.

This psalm talks about green pastures;
still waters.
poignant and fitting images for our Earth Day Celebration.

Earth Day originated in the U.S. in April 1970.
But celebrating Earth Day isn't just an add-on to our judeao-Christian tradition.
Cherishing the earth and creation is a part of our heritage,
even though it's a part that has usually been overlooked.

In the Book of Genesis, when God creates the Earth he calls it **good**.

The earth, and all of creation, is **good**.

The psalms are full of imagery from creation and nature.

Psalms 24 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.'

Psalms 42 'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you O God'

Psalms 50 'The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.'

Psalms 66 'Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth'

Psalms 89 'The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours'

Psalms 96 'O Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.'

Psalms 97 'The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice.'

Jesus often uses earth imagery - the lilies of the field; the vine and the branches;
the birds of the air; sheep and shepherds.

He uses these images to help us understand about God.

And when he uses these images, we get the sense that he cherishes them.

Cherishing the earth and creation is a part of our heritage,

even though it's a part that has usually been overlooked.

So how did we get to a place where we are now?

With climate change, and fracking,

and plans to allow a Pickering wetland to be developed, plans for a Canadian company
to open a massive mine in the middle of the Amazon rainforest?

How did we get to a place where the earth and creation isn't cherished,
but is exploited?

Greed is probably the right answer, the bottom line,

but to get a theological understanding,

we need to look back at church history.

In the 4th century Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire;
a state religion.

Much of our Christian tradition is influenced by Empire,
This is the only tradition with which we're familiar
and so it's difficult for us to identify this influence.

But there were other ancient Christian communities
that were further away geographically
and so out of the range of Roman influence.

Ireneaus lived from 130 AD to 202 AD.

He was a student of Polycarp,
and Polycarp was a student of John the Beloved
to whom we attribute John's gospel and John's letters.

Ireneaus was only 1 teacher away from John.

Way back then, Ireneaus had 3 concerns about 'Mediterranean' (Roman) Christianity.

He was concerned the church was exalting the path of celibacy
and thereby diminishing the feminine;

He was concerned the church was playing down the full humanity of Jesus.

And he was concerned about a teaching that was gaining momentum in the church
the doctrine 'creatio ex nihilo' -- creation out of nothing.

Because if creation is out of nothing, then matter has no worth,

And if matter has no worth you can do anything you want with it.

You can dam rivers; you can pollute lakes; you can frack the earth.

A doctrine of 'creatio ex nihilo' is very convenient doctrine for the Empire.

This doctrine of 'creatio ex nihilo' still permeates all mainline Christian traditions.

But Ireneaus, student of Polycarp,

who was the student of John, who was the student of Jesus
insisted that **everything** is sacred.

Ireneaus insisted that creation is of the **womb** of God;

that creation, matter, comes out of the **very substance** of God.

This understanding of creation and matter as sacred
is central to Celtic Christianity.

The Celtic or Gaelic Christian tradition is old .

Christianity was in Spain and France by 55 AD

and in Britain and Ireland by the end of the 2nd Century.

It was still an oral tradition, and because it was on the fringe of the Empire
escaped the influence of the Empire.

The Celts built rounded buildings, they were agricultural,

They worshipped without temples--

for them the forests and mountains were the original cathedrals,

and they viewed the feminine as sacred.

For the Celts there were 2 books of Revelation -the Bible and creation.

The little book is the Bible, the big book is creation.

Creation is the first revelation of God.

The Celtic Cross has the cross with a circle around it.

The cross of course represents Jesus;

the circle represents creation, the cosmos.

There is an understanding of the connectedness of everything.

All throughout history there have been sacred women and men

who have maintained the sanctity of the earth and of creation.

Julian of Norwich lived in the 1300's. We are familiar with her

'All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.'

She also wrote 'we are not just made by God, we are made **of** God.

This isn't saying that everything is God

Rather it's saying that everything is **of** God,

All creation is a revelation of God.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit priest who lived from 1881- 1955.

He refused to see a division between spirit and matter.

Jesus said 'A prophet isn't without honour except in his own country'.

That's what happened with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

In 1926 the Vatican forbid him to teach or write theologically.

Thankfully for us, before his death he undertook a final act of disobedience,

and signed all his writings over to his assistant. If he hadn't done this,

all his writings would have been destroyed.

These are some of the things he wrote:

'At the heart of matter is the heart of God.'

He emphasized that 'Matter matters', and wrote about

'Spirit-matter', the marriage of spirit and matter, heaven and earth.

And in what I consider a truly prophetic voice wrote that

'The love of Christ and the love of earth and creation

are the twin poles of Christianity of the future.'

Celebrating and honour the goodness of creation

has been part of our tradition from the beginning.

It's a part we need to reclaim;

It's a part we need to proclaim.

Many of us have children or friends
who no longer consider themselves
churchgoers, or even Christian.

Yet many of those same people
are passionate about caring for the environment.

We need to let them know that they're still part of the fold;
that caring for and cherishing creation and the earth **is** part of who we are.

Many passionate environmentalists
have never had anything to do with church.

We need to connect with all of them

And work together with them,
to protect the *green valleys and the still waters*

That King David wrote about 3000 years ago.

Amen.