

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Anniversary Sunday, May 3, 2020
The Rev. Mark McLennan

187 AND COUNTING

Anniversary

- With thanks to Frederick Buechner

Happy Birthday!

Happy Birthday to this old congregation, which was first organized 187 years ago when London had a population of about 600 souls.

Happy Birthday to our 121-year-old building, which has seen many a howling blizzard in its time and many a scorching summer day before the road it stands on ever dreamed of being paved and the air was thick with the dust of horses' hooves and wagon wheels.

Happy Birthday to all of you because more than an organization, more than a building, a church is the people - who come to it to pray and sing and fidget and dream, to shed a tear or two if some word strikes home, and to try to keep a straight face if the soloist strikes a sour note or somebody's hearing aid starts to buzz.

Happy Birthday to all of you, who listen to some sermons and doze through other sermons and do all the other things people do that make them a church and make them human.

And Happy Birthday to Jesus too, I guess it's proper to say, because before this is a Scottish church, or Presbyterian church, or your church, it is after all God's church.

If it hadn't been for Jesus, who knows what other kind of building might have stood on this spot, or what other line of work the Rev. Proudfoot might have gone into, or where you and I might be today-not just where we might be geographically, but where we might be humanly, inside ourselves, if it hadn't been for Jesus and all the things he said and did and all the things people have kept on saying and doing because of him ever since.

What do you do on a birthday?

You get together with your friends, of course. You put on your best clothes. You sing songs. You bring offerings. You whoop it up.

You do a lot of the same things, in other words, that is what we would normally do on an Anniversary Sunday and it seems to me that that's just as it should be.

But there's one thing I propose to do that is usually not done on birthdays.

Just for a moment or two I suggest we set aside our snappers and party hats and give at least one quick look at what it is that we're whooping it up about, what it is that really makes people into a church in the first place.

Since 1833 people have been coming to worship.

Almost two centuries' worth of farmers, mill workers, teachers, business professionals, students, health care workers, an occasional traveler.

Old men and old women with most of their lives behind them, and young men and young women with most of their lives ahead of them.

People who made a go of it and are remembered still, and people who somehow never left their mark in any way the world noticed, and aren't remembered anymore by anybody.

Despite the enormous differences between them, all these men and women came together - because of one thing they had in common.

What they had in common was that, like us, they believed

- (or sometimes believed and sometimes didn't believe;
- or wanted to believe; or liked to think they believed)

that the universe, that everything there is, didn't come about by chance, but was **created by God**.

Like us, they believed, on their best days anyway, that, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, this God was a God like Jesus, which is to say **a God of love**.

That, I think, is the crux of the matter. In 1833 and 1883 and 1933 and all the years between, that is at the heart of what has made this place a church.

In the beginning it was not some vast cosmic explosion that made the heavens and the earth.

It was a loving God who did.

That is our **faith** and the **faith** of all the ones who came before us.

The question is - is it true?

If the answer is **no**, then what we're celebrating today is at best a happy and comforting illusion.

If the answer is **yes**, then we have something to celebrate that makes even a 187-year-birthday look pale by comparison.

I don't suppose there is any passage in either the Old Testament or the New that sums up the faith this church was founded on more eloquently and movingly than the Twenty-third Psalm.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

How many times would you guess those words have been spoken here over the years, especially at dark moments when people needed all the faith they could muster?

How many times have we spoken them ourselves at our own dark moments? But for all their power to bring comfort, do the words hold water?

This faith in God that they affirm, is it borne out by our own experience of life on this planet?

That is a hard and painful question to raise, but let us honor the occasion by raising it anyway.

Does this ancient and beautiful psalm set forth a faith that in the secrecy of our hearts we can still honestly subscribe to?

And what exactly is that faith it sets forth?

The music of the psalm is so lovely that it's hard sometimes to hear through it to what the psalm is saying.

Whoever wrote it had walked through the "valley of the shadow" the way one way or another you and I have walked there too.

He says so himself.

He believed that God was in his heaven, despite the fact that he knew as well as we do that all was far from right with the world. [*sound familiar?*]

And he believed that God was like a **shepherd**.

If God is like a shepherd, there are more than just a few ways, needless to say, that people like you and me are like sheep.

Being timid, greedy, foolish, and half holy, like sheep, is only part of it.

Like sheep we get hungry, and hungry for more than just food. We get thirsty for more than just drink.

Our souls get hungry and thirsty; in fact, it is often that sense of inner emptiness that makes us know we have souls in the first place.

There is nothing that the world has to give us, there is nothing that we have to give to each other even, that ever quite fills them. But once in a while that inner emptiness is filled, even so.

That is part of what the psalm means by saying that God is like a shepherd, I think. It means that, like a shepherd, he feeds us. He feeds that part of us which is hungriest and most in need of feeding.

Green pastures – still waters: we have those, in abundance.

"I shall not want," the psalm says. Is that true?

There are lots of things we go on wanting, go on lacking, whether we believe in God or not.

They are not just material things like a new roof or a better-paying job, but things like good health, things like happiness for our children, things like being understood and appreciated, like relief from pain, like some measure of inner peace not just for ourselves but for the people we love and for whom we pray.

In these strange days, perhaps, we are wanting those things like we never have before.

Believers and unbelievers alike, we go on wanting plenty our whole lives through. We long for what never seems to come. We pray for what never seems to be clearly given.

"I shall not want,"

Maybe it means that if we keep our eyes open, if we keep our hearts and lives open, we will at least never be in want of the one thing we want more than anything else.

Maybe it means that, whatever else is withheld, the shepherd never withholds himself, and he is what we want more than anything else.

Not at every moment of our lives, heaven knows, but at certain rare moments of greenness and stillness, we are shepherded by the knowledge that, though all is far from right with any world you and I know anything about, all is right deep down.

All will be right at last.

I suspect that is at least part of what *"He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness"* is all about.

I suspect that the paths of righteousness he leads us in are more than anything else the paths of trust and the kind of life that grows out of that trust. I think that is the shelter he calls us to when the wind blows bitter and the shadows are dark.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

The psalm does not pretend that evil and death do not exist. Terrible things happen, and they happen to good people as well as to bad people. Even the paths of righteousness lead through the valley of the shadow. Death lies ahead for all of us, saints and sinners alike, and for all the ones we love.

The psalmist doesn't try to explain evil. He doesn't try to minimize evil. He simply says he will not fear evil.

For all the power that evil has, it doesn't have the power to make the writer afraid.

And **why?**

Here at the very center of the psalm comes the very center of the psalmist's faith. Suddenly he speaks to God instead of about him, and he speaks to him as "*thou*."

"I will fear no evil," he says, *"for thou art with me."*

That is the center of faith. **Thou** - That is where faith comes from.

The power of dark is a great power, but the power of light is greater still.

Death and dark are not the end. Life and light are the end. It is what the cross means, of course. The cross means that out of death came, of all things, birth.

Happy Birthday indeed!

The birth we are here to celebrate is not just the birth of this old church in this old town, but the birth of new life, including our own new life

- hope coming out of hopelessness,

- joy coming out of sorrow,
- comfort and strength coming out of fear.

Thanks be to all that the cross means and is, we need never be afraid again.

That is the faith that has kept bringing people to this place from 1833 til today.

That is what has brought me here. Unless I miss my guess, that is what has brought you here.

The psalmist stops speaking of God as a shepherd then. God becomes instead the host at a great feast.

He prepares a table for us the way the table of Holy Communion is prepared for us, and *"in the presence of our enemies"* he prepares it because there is no other place. Our enemies are always present. All the old enemies are always gathered around us everywhere:

- doubt and self-doubt, anxiety, boredom, loneliness, failure, temptation.

But no matter. The table is prepared. Our cups are filled to running over.

We are anointed with this occasion itself-with the sense it gives us of how much we need each other, you and I, and how the party wouldn't be complete without every last one of us;

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever," - a house that is older than Eden and dearer than home.

Something like that is the faith this psalm sings.

In the secrecy of our hearts can we say **Yes** to it?

A birthday is a **Yes** day if ever there was one.

So, pick up the snappers and party hats again. Let the feast continue.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST, AND HOLY SPIRIT...AMEN

John 10: 1-10 – comment

"Radical love. Loving the unlovely. Serving the ungrateful.

Compassion for the corrupt. Welcoming the outcast. Radical love. God's been there, done that and got the t-shirt. This is the Good Shepherd."

OFFERING QUOTE *John Wesley, 18th century*

"Do you not know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind? How can you, how dare you, defraud the Lord, by applying it to any other purpose?"

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Generous and loving God, Your steadfast love endures throughout the ages. Generation after generation, you offer renewal and rest to all who are lost or carry heavy burdens. However far we have strayed, you seek us out and guide us beside still waters. You lead us in path of righteousness,

and walk with us even through the darkest valleys. You are our hope and our source of life. Today we worship you for your endless love, as you embrace us once again, our Creator, Redeemer and Guide. Gentle Shepherd, You guide us in right paths, You lead us in the ways of righteousness, but we have allowed our anger, our rage, our greed, and at times even hate, to direct our paths. We have overreacted, we have taken more than our share, we have despised others that seem to have it all. Forgive us, God, for not following Your ways. Forgive us for not remembering that we are Your sheep, and You are our Shepherd. Forgive us when we have not listened for Your voice and instead have acted in the ways of the world. Guide us back to Your path, to loving You and loving our neighbors. Help us to unclench our fists and lend out our hands in hope and healing, forgiveness and love. In the name of Christ our Shepherd we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The Good Shepherd knows the sheep, and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep so that the sheep may live.

We are part of the flock, we are part of Christ's body.

In Christ we find wholeness and restoration.

Go forth and share this Good News. Amen.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

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...

The Lord's Prayer

Anniversary Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for drawing us into community in this parish that has been a place called home for so many.

Inspire us with the lives of those before us, those ancient ones who have lived here in faith and opened up and given away your love to all those who needed it.

May you change us with a vision to continue here as a constant presence for those who travel through life, a community of welcome that cares for all our parish believing into what is still yet to be.

Teach us to discern your voice as those before us have discerned your voice, guided by its call and feeding on its promise of life and hope and belonging.

May we hear your word: a comforting word in its familiar sound, yet a disturbing word in what it speaks anew and longs for us to become.

Hold us within the faith of our forebears, those who chose to meet you here in this parish, who recognised this thin place as a trysting place where your miracle of grace abides.

May we be moved by that grace into all the places that make up our community, sharing what you have given abundantly like an ever-flowing stream.

Call us from our past, through the voices of our ancestors, in the songs they have sung and the prayers they have spoken that have shaped peace within this parish,

And may we join our voice with their voice, in the one great song of love that will be lived and celebrated yet, throughout this parish. AMEN.

Prayer of Dedication

Generous God, we thank you for all we have received from you which brings us hope and joy. Bless the gifts we bring. May they help to establish your reign in the world you love. In the name of your greatest gift, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

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. AMEN.