

May We Grow Back, Not to What Was, But to What We Can Become

Sunday, April 25, 2021 | The Third Sunday After Easter | [John 10:1-18](#)
Knox-Metropolitan United Church | Regina, SK | Treaty 4 Territory Cameron Fraser

I had a really tiring week.

Which feels like a thing I've said a lot recently.

I'm guessing I that I may not be alone in that.

A New York Times article published on Monday, pondering the phenomenon of languishing seemed to resonate with many, offering a word for something folks struggled to express, was shared widely and picked up by other news outlets suggesting something similar.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html>

This Sunday is Good Shepherd Sunday.

In and around the 1970s during a time of liturgical reform in both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, the Lectionary (which means the passages appointed to be read each week) was reconstituted, putting these passages from John, alongside of the much beloved 23rd Psalm.

And this was placed into the 4th Sunday of Easter.

It's never been my favourite of the special days in the Church year.

The reading from the Gospel of John brings in all of these characters...

The Good Shepherd

The Sheep

The Thief and the Bandit

The Gatekeeper

The Wolf

The Hired Hand

I wonder what you make of all of these?

In conversations I've had with others, and I relate to this as well, imagining oneself into the role of sheep, feels awkward for many.

On one hand there is the whiteness of this image.

Of course, I am aware that sheep have a variety of colours of wool

But in art based on these readings, especially those designed for children

Whether it be cotton balls

And one of the things we have been learning in the church

Is how Western Christianity has embedded within

So many images

So much language

Equating white (white robes, white light, white wool)

With purity

Goodness

While black and darkness was equated with evil, suffering

It's why we've been seeking, to intentionally

Speak of the darkness and fertility of soil

And the darkness of night as full of possibility, comforting, dreamlike creativity

<https://www.anglicanjournal.com/rethinking-darkness-and-light/>

There is of course also the negative association of calling people sheep

Mindlessly following

We hear it deployed on any number of sides

We're hearing the term *sheeple* used a lot these days

Around the subject of following public health guidelines

As I was reading our texts for the week

Thinking about these dynamics

I returned to a blessing

One I know I have read

Several times during this season

Of worshipping online

<https://onbeing.org/blog/john-odohue-for-one-who-is-exhausted-a-blessing/>

A Blessing for One Who is Exhausted

By John O'Donahue

When the rhythm of the heart becomes hectic,
Time takes on the strain until it breaks;
Then all the unattended stress falls in
On the mind like an endless, increasing weight.

The light in the mind becomes dim.
Things you could take in your stride before
Now become laborsome events of will.

Weariness invades your spirit.
Gravity begins falling inside you,
Dragging down every bone.

The tide you never valued has gone out.
And you are marooned on unsure ground.
Something within you has closed down;
And you cannot push yourself back to life.

You have been forced to enter empty time.
The desire that drove you has relinquished.
There is nothing else to do now but rest
And patiently learn to receive the self
You have forsaken in the race of days.

At first your thinking will darken
And sadness take over like listless weather.
The flow of unwept tears will frighten you.

You have traveled too fast over false ground;
Now your soul has come to take you back.

Take refuge in your senses, open up
To all the small miracles you rushed through.

Become inclined to watch the way of rain
When it falls slow and free.

Imitate the habit of twilight,
Taking time to open the well of color
That fostered the brightness of day.

Draw alongside the silence of stone
Until its calmness can claim you.
Be excessively gentle with yourself.

Stay clear of those vexed in spirit.
Learn to linger around someone of ease
Who feels they have all the time in the world.

Gradually, you will return to yourself,
Having learned a new respect for your heart
And the joy that dwells far within slow time.

The rhythm of the heart becomes hectic

Time takes on strain and then breaks

And stress falls in, like a weight

Weariness of spirit

Light becoming dim

Gravity within

No longer a rooting or centring

But a dragging

*You have been forced to enter empty time.
The desire that drove you has relinquished.
There is nothing else to do now but rest
And patiently learn to receive the self
You have forsaken in the race of days.*

This idea of patiently learning to receive the self
Is such a lovely yet complex thought
It's that action of receive
In which I find the resonance
Between this poetic blessing
And the Gospel of John
That theme of known-ness
Being known
Which is a complicated one
In a time of such extreme changes
During which
So much of what has made us who we are
How we understand ourself to be
Is no longer
(temporarily we suppose)
Part of us
Recognizing that of course
This sort of experience will likely change some things
Receive the self

And a few lines later

your soul has come to take you back

Quaker spirituality speaks in similar terms

I wonder if you have ever attended a Quaker service?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxjH4sa2RFI>

I've done so once

There is not

At this time

By which I mean pre-March 2020

An active weekly worshipping community of Friends

In Regina

But when I was in Saskatoon for a course in 2019

So that I would be able to attend the Sunday afternoon service with that community

It was held in the lounge

Of the Unitarian Centre

A blank room

Five chairs in a circle

And we sat

In silence

Eyes closed

For about 55 minutes

As Maggie Harrison puts it

Going inward for your own piece of the divine that you've been given

The renowned Quaker teacher

Parker Palmer speaks of

the true self within every human being that is the seed of authentic vocation

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/working-life/2001/04/01/now-i-become-myself>

Vocation

That word we sometimes use in place of job/career

Funny how we link it closely with paid work

When it of course means so much beyond

Comes from the Latin

For call/voice

Another Good Shepherd concept

*Draw alongside the silence of stone
Until its calmness can claim you.*

This idea of being claimed by calmness

Sureness

I wonder if you have a place

Indoors

Outdoors

That receives you like this?

*Imitate the habit of twilight,
Taking time to open the well of color
That fostered the brightness of day.*

This will be echoed in our closing hymn

Which includes one of my favourite lines

Hearts unfold like flowers before you opening to the sun above.

O'Donahue said in an interview

Which I have shared many times

But is so worth sharing again

<https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty-aug2017/>

Speaking of a space within

...where there is still a sureness in you, where there's a seamlessness in you, and where there is a confidence and tranquility in you. And I think the intention of prayer and spirituality and love is now and again to visit that inner kind of sanctuary.

I'm seeking to touch that space

Seeking to have a Good Shepherd faith

That doesn't simplistically ignore

The shadow space

Believing all will be cool waters and green pastures

But a faith that these are at the core of my being

Calling

Inviting

I flipped back through my files

And found that the first online services

An evening gathering on March 22, 2020

Included a reading of

And reflection on

This week's Psalm

<https://youtu.be/whPzwMKY6Sc?t=970>

It ended like this...

I wonder how, and I pray, that you are finding moments for the life within, for God to make Godself known. In your muscles and tissues, in your thoughts, in the sunlight, in the voices of your beloved ones.

God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.