

## 2021-06-27 WORSHIP SERVICE

### Worship Leading – Pastor Lois

Welcome – greet one another, those on zoom.

Opportunities for Celebration and Service...

I know that I need to pay more attention, in general, to the weather predictions, but this week as I was planning the worship service I REALLY should have been paying closer attention.

The Psalm that I chose for our Call to Worship talks about praising God – in all kinds of situations, in whatever situation we find ourselves. It talks about snow and hail and wind and waters! And I chose what I thought was the perfect hymn to follow it – “All Creatures, Worship God Most High” – because IT also talks about all the elements of nature worshipping God, the Creator. I had no idea how relevant this would all be.

THEN, I chose “Blessed Be Your Name” – a more contemporary praise song that follows in the vein of blessing God, whether in the midst of plentiful times, desert or wilderness places, when the storm clouds gather in and when the sun is shining down on us.

If you’ve looked ahead, to the end of the service, you’ll notice that our sending song today is “Rain Down”. I REALLY need to pay closer attention to the weather forecast.

Please stand and let’s join together, praising God with these verses from Psalm 147.

### Morning Prayer –

God, we do worship and bless you – in fact, that’s the biggest part of the reason we’ve come together this morning! We thank you for poets like the psalmists and those who write songs and music to praise you. We thank you for those who are gifted and thoughtful with words who can write books and articles, stories and essays like the ones we’re reading together on Wednesday evenings. These writers help us think and learn more deeply about what it means to care for your earth. We thank you for the amazing beauty and order of your creation, for the mysteries of the universe.

Creator God, we confess that even in the midst of praising you for the rain this week we also feel sad and disappointed and frustrate about the storms that came with it, because along with badly needed moisture, they also brought destruction and hardship, uncertainty and change of plans. We pray your mercy on those who have losses – of crops, of buildings, of expectations. And we see others whose situation is more dire than our own. We think of those who live in places where there is serious drought, here in our own state and nation and also around the world. We know there are places where there is not enough. There is not enough food, not enough water, not enough homes, not enough safety, not enough justice. God of Love, give us and your children around the world a measure of your mercy, a fragment of your perspective, a glimpse of your kingdom here on earth, as it is in heaven.

God, we offer our prayers for those near to us, who need your healing. We pray for Anita as her wrist heals and she works patiently with the therapists and doctors. We pray for her speedy and complete recovery. We pray for those who are going to camp this week – for Ella Rose, for Myra, for their counselors and other staff who will provide for them this week.

We pray for Darla as she goes to work in the kitchen. Give her energy and stamina. Be with those who are preparing for Sunday school to begin again – students and teachers. We invite your Holy Spirit to bring what's needed to that learning.

Be with us now as we continue to worship. Bless us, challenge us, open and move us. Shape us ever more into your people. We pray in the name your son, our redeemer, Jesus. Amen.

**Benediction –**

Go with the God who gives you abundant life! Be attentive and grateful for the abundance. Be generous and blessed as you share it. Amen.

Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church 6/27/2021  
 “Abundant Life”  
 Sara Dick, Newton Et Cetera Shop

Scripture text: John 10:1-10

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. <sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

In this passage from the gospel of John, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees--the religious purists of his day--and we get to listen in. This wasn't Jesus' first rodeo with the Pharisees. Some of you might know the story of the Pharisee named Nicodemus that's told earlier in the gospel of John. Nicodemus came to talk with Jesus in secret, under cover of darkness, and Jesus schools him in what it means to be born again, about God's love for the world and so much more.

So here we are, listening in to another of Jesus' lessons to a group of these same religious leaders. He starts by saying “Amen, amen,” as it's written in Greek. It's often translated “Very truly” but it could also be “Truly, truly” or “Listen up, folks” or “Hey, everyone” to show us how Jesus is signaling that he's not messing around; he's serious and he's telling them--and us--the truth about something very important.

But Jesus doesn't speak the truth directly here, but instead speaks the truth through riddles or, as the NRSV puts it, through a “figure of speech.” He first describes the difference between a thief and a shepherd by how they enter the sheepfold and whether the sheep know their voice or not and follow them or not. The Pharisees are perplexed by Jesus' riddle or “figure of speech,” and have no idea what he means, so Jesus tries again.

Again he says, “Amen, amen” or “Very truly” to get their attention and impress on them the importance of what he's about to say. This time he says he's the *gate* to the sheepfold, and all the others are thieves and bandits and the sheep will ignore them.

But why is Jesus telling the Pharisees riddles? Why does he communicate indirectly instead of directly? I think he *wants* them to figure things out for themselves, so they can better see how Jesus is different from other religious leaders--those who are out for their own gain and are unconcerned about the well-being of the people they are supposed to lead. The thieves have only their own interests in entering the sheepfold, not the interests of the sheep.

The presence of danger was real to these early Jesus-followers. They were a minority religious group within an occupied land: they were Jewish followers of Jesus who were oppressed by the Roman Empire, as all Jews were, and on top of that found themselves increasingly on the fringes of Jewish religious communities and power structures because they believed Jesus was the Messiah. As an occupied and oppressed people, they knew exactly what Jesus was talking about when he said that “the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.”

And there are people today who know exactly what Jesus is talking about, too. There are *still* some serious risks around us here in the US, especially for Black, Indigenous and Latinx folks. Take COVID-19, for example. Over and over, experts have documented that COVID is a much bigger threat to the health, life and employment of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people than it is to the health, life and employment of white people. By now, we've all lost friends or loved ones to COVID, but some communities experienced that much more than *I* did.

We've seen other dangerous expressions of White Supremacy and other forms of oppression in the past year. There's been an uptick in hate crimes against Asian American people over the past year, we've witnessed violent political rallies, mass shootings and increases in intimate partner violence.

And the pandemic has felt like a grind to many of us, no matter our race or age or ethnicity or gender or sexual orientation. By the time spring rolled around this year, I was exhausted from a year of reading up about COVID, making decisions, explaining those decisions to others, validating other people's decisions and views, setting boundaries for myself and for the shop, explaining and upholding those boundaries, innovating in almost every aspect of daily life at home and work, and trying to keep an organization above water when we weren't open for business and then, once we were open again, when we weren't making enough money to pay all the bills. I'm guessing that many of you have your own stories of COVID stress and fatigue and burnout from coping with so much change and so much loss.

And what about all the people and groups trying to make a killing off of the earth and off of other people? Very truly, as Jesus says, I tell you, there are bandits trying to convince us to follow someone other than Jesus! They're telling us to buy more stuff! Spend more money! Hoard more toilet paper!

They're trying to convince us to judge one another! Exploit one another! Blame one another!

They want us to ignore other people's needs! Take what you want, they tell us, no matter the cost to the earth and the plants and creatures on it!

These bandits encourage us to consider ourselves smarter and better than other people, so we don't have to treat those other people well! And to ignore injustice if it doesn't affect us personally.

Today's bandits are peddling death and calling it life--sacrificing clean water for the benefit of oil barons, sacrificing clean air for the benefit of industrial titans, and sacrificing health and sanity for the benefit of opioid manufacturers.

Today's bandits are exploiting workers and land around the world and calling it the "right to work" and "economic growth" and "resource management."

Thieves and bandits are definitely still around, and they often look just like everyone else--like me and like you--rather than wearing dark colors so they can sneak around at night and steal when everyone's asleep.

Jesus sets up his riddles for maximum contrast between himself and the bandits, and to prepare us for the solution to the riddle he finally reveals in verse 10: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

"I came that they"--the sheep--"may have life, and have it abundantly."

The sheep in these riddles aren't fooled by the thieves and bandits: They ignore the voice they don't recognize and refuse to follow it out of the sheepfold! They know whom to trust and whom to ignore. They know the risks of leaving the sheepfold without the security of a trustworthy shepherd!

Psalms 100 says, "We are God's people, and the sheep of God's pasture." In scripture, sheep are beloved and cared for and of tremendous value. There's been an abundance of sheep or "sheeple" memes circulating during the pandemic, poking fun at people who supposedly act like sheep, not thinking for themselves and following blindly along with the herd. But that's not at all how the sheep behave in Jesus' riddle!

I have no personal experience with sheep, but it seems that *Jesus*, at least, gives them credit for recognizing their shepherd's voice and only leaving the safety of the sheepfold when someone familiar and trustworthy shows up to lead them out--calling them by name even!

These sheep--and, of course, the early followers of Jesus they represent--are being led by Jesus out of the sheepfold of relative safety into green pastures where they'll have a banquet of delights under the watchful eye of the good shepherd. The sheepfold is safe, but the abundant life is bigger and better than that small pen could ever be.

These Jewish followers of Jesus--the first to hear the gospel of John--would have known [the words of Ezekiel we heard this morning in worship and] the words of Psalm 23 by heart--as some of you probably do:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

This Psalm and Jesus' riddles for the Pharisees assure us that violence and theft are *not* God's desire for us; joy and safety and nourishment are. Abundant life is God's desire for us--abundant life characterized by love for one another, as Jesus commands his followers elsewhere in the gospel of John.

The deep solution to Jesus' riddle is this: "I came that [you] may have life, and have it abundantly."

This verse came to my mind while I was gardening on Easter morning two months ago. As I dug in my yard and transplanted flowers from one spot to another in the early hours of Resurrection Sunday, I could see Jesus' promise of abundant life taking shape all around me in the natural abundance of spring.

I suspect that these words arose in me not *just* because of spring's abundant flower show, but also because of the abundance that is accessible to me as part of communities of Jesus-followers. Scarcity is the threat of so many bandits, but *abundance* is the reality of the beloved community that is following the trusted voice of Jesus.

As part of the Newton Et Cetera Shop staff, I get to experience abundance every day! Sure, I'm talking about all the great stuff that's donated to our store and gets put out on our sales floor every day. I can *see* abundance in people's generosity at our back door and their joy in shopping thrift on our sales floor. But tons of *stuff* is not the best and certainly not the only definition of "abundance." In fact, we'd be delighted if people had less stuff in the first place and so had less to give away. If we had that problem, we'd happily figure out how to adapt to less consumerism in our community!

I also see abundance at the shop in how we do our best every day to share God's love with all creation--inside our thrift shop, in the community and around the world--and we hope you experience that when you're at the shop to donate, volunteer or purchase second-hand items.

At the Et Cetera shop, I see an abundance of passion and grace and good humor and care for others in our donors, our customers, our volunteers and our employees. I experience abundance with employees and volunteers and board members when we celebrate personal and professional accomplishments and birthdays and graduations and retirements and recovery from illness.

I see abundance in difficult moments, too--how we're able to share resources with people even when they're experiencing something as difficult as homelessness or abuse or addiction. How people "love one another" when they've lost a family member or are seriously ill. Even in the darkest valley, there can be abundance in our life in Christ together.

Even during the pandemic--and maybe especially during the pandemic--I've seen abundance in our shop and in the community: the availability of funds to help businesses and nonprofits make payroll and cover extra expenses related to safety protocols; the willingness of *most* people to wear a mask and now to get vaccinated in order to slow the pandemic; and the way that people have risen to the challenge issued by groups like Black Lives Matter to address the discrimination and death built into our nation and our ways of doing things.

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." This verse from John's gospel is beloved by many because of how deeply it speaks to our basic needs. For a moment, let's imagine what abundance might look like for you. Maybe it's . . .

- A flower garden in bloom
- A full toybox or a library
- A delicious banquet of your favorite foods
- A full shopping cart at the grocery store
- Chickens in your backyard
- A good harvest from your garden or your farm
- Birds and other wildlife frolicking in your backyard or at a park or at a nature preserve
- A gathering of your loved ones to celebrate a milestone
- Enough money to pay your bills and to share with others in need
- Good health

- People of many different ages and races and ethnicities and talents gathering together with a common purpose
- Creativity, whether through music, art, leadership, dance or another creative expression
- Healing of broken trust and broken boundaries
- Healing of broken bodies and broken land
- A full church building and a new elevator
- An active youth group and children's ministry
- A thrift shop

Maybe someday we'll be called the Abundant Life Thrift Shop, but for now we'll stick with Newton Et Cetera Shop and claim our abundance by exploring and expanding our core values: Sharing God's love for all creation, showing care for our earth, investing in community partnerships, practicing stewardship and economic justice, and welcoming people of all ages, cultures, races and languages.

And maybe someday you'll be called the "Abundant Life Church," like so many other faith communities have called themselves, but for now I'm assuming you'll stick with "Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church" and claim your abundance in all the other ways you were just able to imagine--and in ways you haven't yet imagined. Your work together with pastors Lois and Caleb and with each other will open new ways of seeing and creating abundance together, as you listen for Jesus' voice calling to you.

Jesus said, "I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly." Jesus does not offer us just a *taste* of the good life, but the full buffet of abundance: love and joy and support and art and safety and rest and challenge and struggle and food and home.

To draw again from Psalm 100,

<sup>1</sup>Make a joyful noise to God's love, all the earth.

<sup>2</sup>Worship the Beloved with gladness;  
come into her presence with singing.

<sup>3</sup>Know that the Lord is God. It is God that made us, and we are God's;  
we are God's people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.