

Mothering Sunday Sermon by Bishop Geoff Peddle
March 22, 2020, Anglican Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, St. John's Newfoundland
Fourth Sunday in Lent

I greet you this morning from our Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in St. John's Newfoundland. This is not where I expected to be today, and in fact I planned to be in St. Lewis, Labrador, this very hour and in Cartwright this evening for Confirmation. And I am quite certain that your place of worship this morning is not where you expected it to be today. Many of you planned to be in your local churches at this time and instead find yourselves sharing in worship from your living rooms through the medium of a computer screen. The unwelcome impact on our lives of the Covid-19 Pandemic has changed everything for us in a matter of days. Following on the heels of the dreadful storms we experienced in January and February, it has come like another winter gale, knocking over everything we had come to treasure, and leaving us worried and confused, perhaps even tempted to believe that things will never ever be the same.

And for a time, things will not be the same. The state of medical emergency declared in our province and the resulting changes for everyone in terms of their ability to move freely, and socialize without concern, mean that we are in a different place for the foreseeable future. We all have to adapt and restructure our lives, practicing social distancing and other precautions to protect ourselves and others. And that is why we are gathered today in this way.

Today is the 4th Sunday of Lent and in the traditional calendar of our church this is also Mothering Sunday. Not to be confused with Mother's Day, which comes in May, Mothering Sunday, is customarily a time to celebrate the three mothers we all share: Mary the Mother of our Lord, our Mother Church, and our earthly mothers. Mothering Sunday was a time when our forebears would give thanks for mother Mary, often visit their local cathedral – the Mother Church of their diocese, and make a special effort to see their own mothers. In some churches I served over the years a special cake called a Simnel Cake was baked for Mothering Sunday, sometimes known as Refreshment Sunday, and shared with the churchgoers.

And so, it is appropriate that we all come together in the Mother Church of our diocese today. I gather with just a few members of our clergy in person and with hundreds of you livestreaming. The format of this service is a familiar one from our Book of Alternative Services and has been previously distributed online. Do feel welcome to participate in today's worship, sharing in the prayers and in the hymns. I encourage your local churches to offer similar worship in the days ahead during this time of medical constraint. We are, as I alluded, in the midst of a storm right now but one thing I do know is that no storm lasts forever, and this too shall pass. It will take some weeks and likely some months before things begin to come back to normal, even if the new normal for us will look and feel somewhat different from the old normal.

The impact of this emergency will certainly bring about changes in our faith community, and accelerate changes already underway. We are focusing now upon what is essential in the life of our church, paring away some things which are not crucial, and focusing upon that which is most needed. It is amazing how our priorities of just a week ago are no longer our priorities of today. My heart sings with gratitude for those members of our clergy and countless others who are discovering new ways of being the church in the world.

I am hearing stories of our people grocery shopping for seniors who are particularly at risk right now. I know of people who are picking up drug prescriptions for others hesitant to go to the drug store. And I have taken part in

dropping off food and other kinds of gifts at the doorstep for those who are remaining indoors at the present time. And who among us cannot be moved by photos of grandchildren visiting their grandparents through the glass in their windows, with bigger hands pressed to the glass from inside and smaller hands pressed to the glass from outside.

Across our faith community there is an active and ongoing ministry of telephone calls, emails, and other kinds of communications to ensure that nobody should feel alone, or isolated. This past week I shared in 6 different teleconferences with our clergy along with dozens of telephone calls, countless emails and other consultations. Our prayers today go out to all whose lives have been profoundly impacted of late and we hold in our hearts any who have been laid off, or who find the hours long because they are home from school or feeling challenged by many hours indoors. We hold before God everyone on the “front line” right now such as our nurses, doctors, health care workers, first responders and all caregivers in our institutions and in our homes.

This is a time in which many of us will journey deeper into our faith and connect more fully with our God. It is a time for us to recall the words of the Great Commandment *to love God with all of our hearts and our souls and our minds and our strength and to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves*. This is a time to bring forth our very best in the midst of great challenge and be renewed in faith and hope and love. We cannot control what is happening around us but we *can* control how we respond. This is a time for us to discover new ways of being the church in the world.

I have always loved the poetry of Robert Frost and over the years have memorized more than a few of his poems. One of my favourites is Into My Own in which he writes of journeying alone into a vast wood and emerging sometime later, in his words, “not changed ... from him they knew – Only more sure of all I thought was true.” May this season in our lives be such a time from which we will emerge one day, not necessarily changed, but more certain of those things which we already knew to be true.

One of the scripture readings appointed for today is the 23rd Psalm. This psalm is undoubtedly the best known of those ancient Hebrew writings and has been with us for the entire history of our faith as Christians. It is read aloud quite regularly in public worship and during times of special need. In this psalm, God is compared to a shepherd, and we by comparison are compared to sheep. The relationship of shepherd to sheep is a common one in Holy Scripture and serves repeatedly to remind us of who God is and who we are. For many generations this psalm has spoken to some of the deepest longings of the human heart. Listen once more to this psalm as it evokes powerful and loving images:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his name's sake. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over. Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

The ancient writer of this psalm understood the life of a shepherd. He knew something of the responsibility a shepherd felt for every sheep in the flock. He knew the difference between a good shepherd who took care of his flock and a lazy shepherd who left the flock to take care of itself. Being a shepherd is still one of those 24-

hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week jobs that demands both patience and determination, above and beyond what is often required in many other livelihoods.

And that is why, when the writer of the 23rd Psalm refers to God as his shepherd he is telling us far more about God than we might realize. God, to the writer of Psalm 23, was the true shepherd; not only able to care for and protect his flock amidst the dangers of this world, but able to guide them safely into the next. The 23rd Psalm is the song of the shepherd. It is the poem of God's love for us.

Some years after that psalm was written, God came in human form to shepherd us home to him. He came to us in the person of Jesus. Like a Good Shepherd, Jesus loved us so much that he was willing to give his own life for us. A good shepherd will even lay down his life for his sheep. And *the* Good Shepherd knows each sheep by name.

But there is still more to this psalm that is of great meaning for us today and it lies in that image of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, that place of deep darkness where even hope and faith can be in short supply. That valley of death's shadow through which we all must pass, as frightening as it may be, is still not so deep that God's love cannot find us. Some of us right now may be in such a place, but as people of faith let us not feel that we are alone. For in the midst of our own fears and uncertainties God is with us and even now God comes to us through family and friends and neighbors and others who love and care for us.

And that includes the elderly couple in Newfoundland who are sad today because they are unable to hold their new grandchild in Alberta. It includes that grandmother yesterday who so wanted to watch a special granddaughter get married in the United States but could not be there in person. It includes somebody in hospital right now feeling lonely because of restrictions on outside visitors. In the midst of this journey know that you are not alone. You are loved, you are cared for, and you are held tightly in prayer by many right now. This too shall pass.

For me that valley of darkness the writer of the psalm describes, which I have also traveled through, is like that great rock cut on the Trans-Canada Highway out in the Doe Hills near Chance Cove, Trinity Bay. I remember when it was put there in the 1980's and it required great effort to blast through the rock leaving a very steep rockface on both sides of the road. In fact, the cliff on either side as you drive through is so high that depending upon the time of day it can block out the sun. It's even worse on those days when fog creeps in from Placentia Bay on the other side and for a time the sense of being isolated from all that is familiar can be overwhelming. But as you drive into that valley of shadow you can do so with confidence because you know it is only temporary and you will emerge on the other side in the light of day again. To know that even in darkness there continues to be light is what I call faith. Let us hold onto our faith in the midst of uncertainty. For this too shall pass.

Brother Richard Hendrick, a Capuchin Franciscan living in Ireland, has penned a touching poem about where we all find ourselves today. Brother Richard shared his poem "Lockdown" in a Facebook post on Friday, March 13. I share his words with you today.

Lockdown by Brother Richard:

Yes there is fear.

Yes there is isolation.

Yes there is panic buying.

Yes there is sickness.

Yes there is even death.

But,

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise

You can hear the birds again.

They say that after just a few weeks of quiet

The sky is no longer thick with fumes

But blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi

People are singing to each other

across the empty squares,

keeping their windows open

so that those who are alone

may hear the sounds of family around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland

Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.

Today a young woman I know

is busy spreading fliers with her number

through the neighbourhood

So that the elders may have someone to call on.

Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples

are preparing to welcome

and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary

All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting

All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way

All over the world people are waking up to a new reality

To how big we really are.

To how little control we really have.

To what really matters.

To Love.

So we pray and we remember that

Yes there is fear.

But there does not have to be hate.

Yes there is isolation.

But there does not have to be loneliness.

Yes there is panic buying.

But there does not have to be meanness.

Yes there is sickness.

But there does not have to be disease of the soul

Yes there is even death.

But there can always be a rebirth of love.

Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.

Today, breathe.

Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic

The birds are singing again

The sky is clearing,

*Spring is coming,
And we are always encompassed by Love.
Open the windows of your soul
And though you may not be able
to touch across the empty square,
Sing*

May God bless and protect you and everyone near and dear to you this day and always. Amen.

GP

Into My Own by Robert Frost

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,
But stretched away unto the edge of doom.
I should not be withheld but that some day
Into their vastness I should steal away,
Fearless of ever finding open land,
Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.
I do not see why I should e'er turn back,
Or those should not set forth upon my track
To overtake me, who should miss me here
And long to know if still I held them dear.
They would not find me changed from him they knew—
Only more sure of all I thought was true.