

Hybrid Worship for March 19, 2023
Fourth Sunday of Lent

Territorial Acknowledgment and Announcements

We acknowledge that the land on which we gather is situated upon traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron - Wyandot, the Haudenosaunee and later the Mississauga of the Credit First Nations. The territory is mutually covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and the Ojibway and other allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

Today, this remains the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in their community, and to share and respect Mother Earth.

Centering Music: Open Our Hearts MV 21

Open our hearts, open our minds.
Open our lives to you O loving God.
Open our hearts, open our minds.
Open our lives to you O loving God.

Call to Worship and Opening Prayer:

One: As we travel on our Lenten journey,

All: open our hearts

One: to your ever-living love and care,

All: open our hearts

One: to truth and justice and your vision,

All: open our hearts

One: to God's spirit within us.

All: Open our hearts.

One: Let's pray together.

All: Dear God,

As we gather in this sanctuary or at home,

on Zoom or in person,

we thank you for giving us a path to your 'kindom'.

Give us room in our hearts for compassion and openness.

You are with us in the dark places

And in the joys and hopes of our living.

Give us your grace and peace in these Lenten times.

Amen.

Opening Hymn: Soil of God, You and I MV 174

Soil of God, you and I, stand ready to bear
seeds of faith nourished by God's tender care.

Growing in everyone for here God is found.
All stand together, we are Holy ground.

Soil of God, you and I, now ready to be
part of God's promise for others to see.
Open to everyone for here god is found.
All stand together, we are Holy ground.

Soil of God, you and I, now called to rebirth
joining as partners will all of the earth.
Living in harmony for here God is found.
All stand together, this is Holy ground.

Prayer for Reflection and Revelation:

Come with me, come wander, come welcome the world,
Where strangers might smile or where stones may be hurled;
Come leave what you cling to, lay down what you clutch
And find, with hands empty, that hearts can hold much.
We come to God as we are:
We come with a history of rights and wrongs,
We come with a past of shaky discipleship,
We come with the chequered mixture called life.

We long to stay with what is familiar,
to cling to the comfortable, the predictable;
to hold to the past, however painful;
to find our security in a world of our making.

But God calls us to move on:
to enter the place of reflection and change,
to be confronted and challenged with reality,
to encounter the life-giving presence within.

From Eggs and Ashes, by Judith Jessop

Sung Response: Take, O Take Me as I Am MV 85

Take, O take me as I am;
summon out what I shall be;
set your seal upon my heart
and live in me.

Scripture Readings:

Psalm 23 The Inclusive Bible
YHWH, you are my shepherd --

I want nothing more.
You let me lie down in green meadows;
you lead me beside restful waters:
you refresh my soul.
You guide me to lush pastures
for the sake of your Name.
Even if I'm surrounded by shadows of Death,
I fear no danger, for you are with me.
Your rod and your staff--
they give me courage.
You spread a table for me
in the presence of my enemies,
and you anoint my head with oil--
my cup overflows!
Only goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in your house, YHWH,
for days without end.

John 9:1-41 The Message

As Jesus walked along, he saw someone who had been blind from birth.
The disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, was it this individual's sin that caused the blindness,
or that of the parents?"

"Neither," answered Jesus,

"It wasn't because of anyone's sin--
not this person's, nor the parents'.
Rather, it was to let God's works shine forth
in this person.

We must do the deeds of the One who sent me
while it is still day --
for night is coming,
when no one can work.
While I am in the world,
I am the light of the world."

With that, Jesus spat on the ground, made mud with his saliva and
smeared the blind one's eyes with the mud. Then Jesus said,
"Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" -- "Siloam" means "sent."
So the person went off to wash, and came back able to see.
Neighbours and those who had been accustomed to seeing
the blind beggar began to ask, "Isn't this the one who used to
sit and beg?" Some said yes; others said no--the one who
had been healed simply looked like the beggar.

But the individual in question said, "No--it was me."

The people then asked, "Then how were your eyes opened?"

The answer came, "The one they call Jesus made mud and smeared it on my eyes, and told me to go to Siloam and wash. When I went and washed, I was able to see."

"Where is Jesus?" they asked.

The person replied, "I have no idea."

They took the one who had been born blind to the Pharisees.

It had been on a Sabbath that Jesus had made the mud paste and opened this one's eyes. The Pharisees asked how the individual could see. They were told, "Jesus put mud on my eyes. I washed it off, and now I can see."

This prompted some Pharisees to say, "This Jesus cannot be from God, because he doesn't keep the Sabbath."

Others argued, "But how could a sinner perform signs like these?"

They were sharply divided.

Then they addressed the blind person again: "Since it was your eyes he opened, what do you have to say about this Jesus?"

"He's a prophet," came the reply.

The Temple authorities refused to believe that this one had been blind and had begun to see, until they summoned the parents

"Is this your child?" they asked, "and if so, do you attest that your child was blind at birth? How do you account for the fact that now your child can see?"

The parents answered, "We know this is our child, blind from birth. But how our child can see now, or who opened those blind eyes, we have no idea. But don't ask us --our child is old enough to speak without us!"

The parents answered this way because they were afraid of the Temple authorities, who had already agreed amongst themselves that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

That was why they said, "Our child is of age and should be asked directly."

A second time they summoned the one who had been born blind and said, "Give God the glory instead; we know that this Jesus is a sinner."

"I don't know whether he is a sinner or not," the individual answered.

"All I know is that I used to be blind, and now I can see."

They persisted, "Just what did he do to you? How did

he open your eyes?"

"I already told you, but you won't listen to me," came the answer. "Why do you want to hear it all over again? Don't tell me you want to become disciples of Jesus too?"

They retorted scornfully, "You're the one who is Jesus' disciple. We're disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this Jesus comes from."

The other retorted: "Well, this is news! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes! We know that God doesn't hear sinners, but that if people are devout and obey God's will, God listens to them. It is unheard of that anyone ever gave sight to a person blind from birth. If this one were not from God, he could never have done such a thing!"

"What!" they exclaimed. "You're steeped in sin from birth, and you're giving us lectures?" With that they threw the person out.

When Jesus heard of the expulsion, he sought out the healed one and asked, "Do you believe in the Chosen One?"

The other answered, "Who is this One, that I may believe?"

"You're looking at him," Jesus replied. "The Chosen One is speaking to you now."

The healed one said, "Yes, I believe," and worshiped Jesus.

And Jesus said, "I came into this world to execute justice--to make the sightless see and the seeing blind."

Some of the Pharisees who were nearby heard this and said, "you're not calling us blind, are you?"

To which Jesus replied, "If you were blind, there would be no sin in that. But since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

Choir: Tender Shepherd, El Shaddai

Reflection: Living in a New Way

Hymn: Are You a Shepherd? MV 126

Are you a shepherd, good shepherd who leads us
safely through danger, while calming our fears?

Are you a father who shelters and feeds us,

shares in our laughter and wipes away tears?

Yes, you are shepherd, parent and teacher,
but you are greater than all that we know.

Holy and living, loving and giving,

God, you are with us wherever we go.

Are you a mother, good mother who bears us,
comforts, protects us and helps us to rest?

Are you a teacher who daily prepares us,
challenging students to offer their best?

Yes, you are shepherd, parent and teacher,
but you are greater than all that we know.

Holy and living, loving and giving,

God, you are with us wherever we go.

Great, gentle shepherd, forever beside us,
lead all your children in paths that are right.

Great, loving parent, wise teacher, you guide us.

We want to love you and bring you delight.

Yes, you are shepherd, parent and teacher,
but you are greater than all that we know.

Holy and living, loving and giving,

God, you are with us wherever we go.

Introduction to the Offering:

As always, we respond to God's love and joy
by presenting our gifts for the work of our church
here and around the world.

Our offering will be received.

From Gathering Lent 2002 by Dorothy MacNeill.

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Gift of Music

Hymn of Dedication: "Grant us, God, the Grace" VU 540

Grant us, God, the grace of giving,

with a spirit large and free,

that ourselves and all our living

we may offer faithfully.

Offering Prayer

**All: We know there is much need, O God,
and we offer what we can to help.
Spread the good we intend where it is needed,
we pray, that it may help our neighbours,
near and far, through Christ, in love. Amen**

Prayers of the People:

God, our God, you have called us to be a people
on the move; travelling light, dying to live,
ready to lose ourselves for the sake of the world.

You have called us to be a people with a purpose;
travelling without a map, travelling to where we are led,
sustained by your Spirit,
committed to the gospel for the hope of the world.

You have called us, your people, to be the church.
But we are a church with problems:
We are perceived as being
too strong for the weak, too staid for the young,
too respectable for the poor, too divided for mission,
too obsessed with our own lives to think of the lives of others,
too unsure of our message to speak to the world.
We ask for your grace and guidance as we search for the path
that leads us to reconciliation with all creation.

We remember those who are:
forgotten
suffering
marginalized
misunderstood
the last and least

Guide and support us as we find ways to shine our light
on the needs in our community and as we work towards
social justice for all.

We remember in silence those people and situations on
our hearts and minds

Lead us on our journey

from who we are to who you want us to be;
so that patience is built into us,
kindness is assumed in us,
gentleness is part of us,
truth is second nature to us,
and the commitment of love is part of us.

Let us go gladly on the journey towards Easter –
the journey towards death and resurrection.
Let us journey in the peace and power of the Spirit.
Amen.

Adapted from Eggs and Ashes by Ruth Harvey

The Lord's Prayer (sung) VU 959

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.

Closing Hymn: Open My Eyes VU 371

Open my eyes, that I may see
glimpses of truth thou hast for me;
place in my hands the wonderful key
that shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear
voices of truth thou sendest clear;
and while the wavenotes fall on my ear,
everything false will disappear.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my mouth, and let me bear
gladly the warm truth everywhere;
open my heart and let me prepare
love with thy children thus to share.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Commissioning/Blessing:

One: Now go to take the love of God into the world.

All: We will show others the way to God's fields of grace.

One: Now go to take the grace of Jesus into the world.

All: We will seek to bring others to the still waters of peace.

One: Now go to take the community of the Spirit into the world.

All: We will work to restore the lives of all whom we meet.

Written by Thom M. Shuman

Sung Amen: VU 971

Reflection

This is the fourth Sunday of Lent. It is a time for reflection, a time for hearing again the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem and a time for choosing a journey for ourselves on a path of learning, love and commitment.

This morning Charlotte read us the 23rd Psalm from The Inclusive Bible but I am sure most of you can repeat some, if not all of the psalm as you learned it in Sunday School or because it has become such a familiar passage over the years. My Sunday School class had a picture of a very tidy shepherd and some beautiful white sheep in our classroom and, in the eyes an urban child, it looked like a pretty good job.

"The Lord is my shepherd" What does a shepherd really do? The primary responsibility of the shepherd is the safety and welfare of the flock. The shepherd takes the sheep to areas of good foliage and keeps a watchful eye out for poisonous plants. He or she (although we only hear about the men) watches for enemies and is ready to defend and protect. Sheep that are sick or wounded are tended and mourned if death occurs. A shepherd will search for and rescue a lost or trapped sheep. The shepherd is trustworthy, gives up much for the flock and plans and works for their wellbeing through changes of terrain, food supply and weather. The shepherd knows the members of the flock individually and calls them by name.

Sound familiar? Perhaps this psalm is a foreshadowing of the "Good Shepherd" in the New Testament- the one whose Lenten journey we are following. David who wrote the psalm certainly knew the life of a shepherd before he was unexpectedly called to be a king, a leader.

David writes that the Lord is MY shepherd. When the shepherd moves forward to the head of the flock, the sheep follow because they know and trust the shepherd. They recognize the voice of the shepherd calling their names. They look to the shepherd to guide them, protect them, and help them to stay on track.

We work to know and trust Jesus and God as we learn and renew our understanding of how to live in new ways with each other, as a church and within our communities.

The new commandment “Love one another as I have loved you” isn’t as easy as it sounds. Isaiah says, “We have each gone our own way” and it is hard to face change and face some of our prejudices and set ways.

Just like sheep without a shepherd put themselves in danger and may become hungry, lost or wounded, we put ourselves in the dark places of life without a guide, a protector, a teacher, a comforter.

In our church community, we need shepherds and those who can support the shepherds- all of us can listen, learn and grow, take on risk and leadership (sometimes unexpectedly) for the new possibilities in our living.

During Lent, we turn again to our shepherd, the leader who did not come proclaiming a kingdom with power and might but a “kindom” with love for each of us, justice for all and action for a new path.

We go forward with God’s spirit within us on our Lenten journey of rediscovery and reflection as individuals and as a church family.

We’ve probably all had some experience of change in our lives which has transformed the way we live, or how we see people and situations. I’m going to share one of my own experiences with you this morning.

After moving to Mississauga, we searched for a United Church and arrived at St. Luke’s-on-the-Hill in the pouring rain. We stumbled across this church by accident – maybe! We were welcomed by a young man who helped me and my girls get settled.

Rev. Charles Lewis, days later, knocked on the door and asked if I taught Sunday School – which I had done in my home church in Matachewan. I decided to get involved.

Over the years I continued to be part of church life and then a seed was planted during a conversation about leadership, and was slowly growing.

It became more apparent to me later when the minister at that time recommended I become a student again. She gave me information about the Learning for Leadership course, hoping that I would register. Instead I found every excuse I could to explain why I couldn’t do it. She became the person who opened my eyes to a new way, a transformation.

The seed continued to grow because she recognized my gifts and encouraged me. I trusted her and her ability to give me confidence, and the need to live in a new way.

Throughout the two years of the course there was a lot of work which I had to accomplish, both practical and spiritual. With the support of my shepherd and church family I was always encouraged to keep growing and learning. I felt God was walking every step with me.

After completing the course it transformed my life. It opened my eyes – I am no longer blind to the injustices of our world. I gained enough confidence to speak up and speak out about racism, privilege and treatment of the 2SLGBTQ+ and Indigenous communities, and to show up when needed.

My mother's example of empathy, kindness and caring also planted a seed when I was young. It lay dormant for many years until I recognized my gifts and had found my shepherd and flock in later years. I was ready to listen to God's whisper and accept the loving support of the people around me as they walked with me on my new path.

This change took a long time. I was fearful of how it would change my life. Looking back, I realize that God's guidance was and is always with me even though I try to ignore it at times.

At this moment God may be whispering to each of us here today, and God does not give up on any of us.

Not only are individuals transformed to live in new ways, it happens to communities as well, including Applewood. Let's hear our story.

As you have heard Sophie and Joan say, our scripture readings this morning talk to us about living in new ways. Jesus, as our shepherd, leads and guides us to new pastures, through good and difficult times. Jesus performed one of his miracles by opening the eyes of a man blind from birth so that he could see life in a new and exciting way, see things he had never seen before and experience things very differently.

We heard in the story from John that not everyone was happy about that. They didn't think he was the same person. His parents were blamed for his blindness, the Pharisees were very unhappy, lots of questions were being asked and there seems to have been a general angst in the community around him.

Not only do we have to look at things differently in our own lives, as individuals, but we also have to look at things differently in our community. Life is change – we can't escape that – although we would like to think that everything stays the same forever. How boring that would be!

We think change is sometimes unnecessary, causes too much trouble and gets in our way. But one thing I have noticed, people in general say they don't like change but if our favourite local restaurant doesn't change the menu once in a while, we complain. If our bulletin boards at church are not changed on a regular basis, we hear complaints. Mmm – what's that about! Are we saying change and new ways of looking at things are OK in certain situations but not in others? Good question and something to consider.

When we think about new ways of doing and being in our community there are several components we need to make it work. We need shepherds and leaders, people we trust to help us along the way. We need the flock, the congregation, to support the leaders and to contribute in ways large and small so that the goal is eventually reached.

We've all been part of this process at one time or another. Applewood is 70 years old this year and we all know there have been many changes and new situations over those years. I've been here for 20 of them and can think of lots.

Twenty years ago there was a huge change – a total new way of being church. Three congregations came together to form a new entity and if you look back you will realize that everyone had a part to play in the end result. There were leaders and shepherds who were trusted to guide, direct, support, listen and share their wisdom along the way. We began living in a new way. Did we always think it could be

done? Probably not at the outset, but one foot in front of the other and look where we are - a vibrant, active congregation, well known in our community.

Another new way of being happened in 2014 when we became an Affirming congregation. How did we get there? Again we had leaders and shepherds, we had trust in each other, and we spent many hours together learning to let go of our prejudices, pre-conceived notions and stereotypes, being open and honest with each other as we journeyed.

We have learned to look at things in new ways so many times over the last few years, for instance the use of inclusive language, hybrid worship, involvement with interfaith work, among other things. Even our choir had to totally change the way we provided music over COVID. I don't think any of us ever imagined sitting in our homes making a lonely recording on our phones and then sending it in to be blended with everyone else's, the end result amazed us all!

Have those new ways challenged us, have they been difficult? The answer is yes, but that didn't stop us.

The one thing that we can count on through everything is that we are not alone. God walks with us through this, she provides support for everyone, encourages those who have the gifts and skills to be leaders and shepherds to stand up and be counted, even if they are reluctant. We have a great example in Moses for that!

We have a direct line to God through prayer, any time, any place, any situation but we do need to stay alert and listen carefully to that sometimes still small voice and be observant about where the Spirit is moving or guiding us. It's not always in the direction we think we should go or would like to go but if we have faith and trust then we can proceed.

As a church family, Applewood does need to look at our congregational life in a new way. Things have changed for us, we are smaller and need to tighten our governance structure, the way of being church in the world has changed, not only for us but for every church.

We can choose to welcome the new path, the new learnings, to shine our light, and live a good life of love where we are planted.

We can do it, we have the assurance of the presence of God through whatever challenges lay ahead. Our New Creed begins with: We are not alone, we live in God's world, and ends with We are not alone, Thanks be to God.