

Learning on the Everlasting Arms, Music: Anthony J. Showalter, Lyrics: Elisha A. Hoffman, Artists: Candice Bist, Bruce Ley

What a fellowship, what a joy divine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Refrain:

Leaning, leaning,
Safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Oh, how sweet to walk in this pilgrim way,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
Oh, how bright the path grows from day to day,
Leaning on the everlasting arms. *Refrain:*

What have I to dread, what have I to fear,
Leaning on the everlasting arms?
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near,
Leaning on the everlasting arms. *Refrain:*

Welcome

Happy New Year, and Peace be with you right now in this moment that you breathe. Let us all breathe and hope and pray peace, peace into this new and uncertain year ahead. All new matters have an uncertainty with them, and 2021 will prove to be no different than 2020 in this regard.

I am Rev. Dr. Candice Bist and this is the second to last of my podcasts for Shelburne Primrose Pastoral Charge where I have served for the last five years alongside our musical director, and my husband, Bruce Ley. It is second of a three-part series I am offering to all of you, as a kind of audio goodbye card, a series of personal reflections on our mutual faith.

Shelburne and Primrose are located in southern Ontario, and we are experiencing a Christmastide Season of long snowy days and grey skies. Everything feels still, silent. We are in the midst of a 28-day lock down due to the coronavirus pandemic and nature and people seem to be of one accord – a rarity in and of itself – stillness in the skies and on the ground and in the local towns and in the little woods outside my home. But, our care givers, our grocery and pharmacy workers, our nurses and doctors and paramedics and research teams and

everyone who serves in essential services carries on, amazingly, can we ever be grateful enough to them for this call to service? I don't think so, but we can try.

Last week, I wove together some of my favourite scriptures – though like little children who feel they have been left out of the party, all sorts of scriptures have been waving at me this week imploringly, whimpering, 'I thought I was your favourite', which has been a lovely surprise, they just keep popping up all over the place, and I see, as never before, how scripture has informed my thinking. Do you remember when we spoke about Mary and her Magnificat during Advent, and how all the pictures of her show her reading, even though it is unlikely she was literate? This was so the artists could illustrate how the scriptures she had heard since she was a child had formed her mind. Well, turns out they have formed mine too, and all of yours as well, far more than we might have imagined.

So, today, we are going to look at some of the basic theologies within our faith, again, through my own personal experience with them.

Theology is just a fancy word for the study of God. And word God – Theo - is just a place holder for something grand and astonishing and huge and stunning and love and goodness and creativity beyond us. And I have always found the best way to study– ology meaning study of - is to have conversations. So, theology is then. a conversation with that which we do not know but would like to be acquainted with in a more intimate way. And just as being acquainted with a moose or a great Oak tree is not really possible, still the drawing close to them offers us an experience, a conversation of sorts. And I think that is the way with theology, we draw close to certain understandings in our tradition, and we have conversations with them, and experiences with them in our lives. This is how we learn at a deeper level than the mere collecting of facts.

As he did last week, Bruce begins our time of reflection together with a musical prayer. And a reminder, that on the website I offer a lyric only version of our transcript so you can sing along with Bruce and I during our service.

For the Healing of the Nations, Music and Lyrics: Fred Kaan, Artists: Bruce Ley

For the healing of the nations,
 God, we pray with one accord;
for a just and equal sharing
 of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action
 help us rise and pledge our word.

Lead your people into freedom,
 from despair your world release,

that, redeemed from war and hatred,
all may come and go in peace.
Show us how, through care and goodness,
fear will die and hope increase.

All that kills abundant living,
let it from the earth be banned:
pride of status, race or schooling,
dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
may we hallow life's brief span.

You, Creator-God, have written
your great name on humankind;
for our growing in your likeness,
bring the life of Christ to mind;
that by our response and service
earth its destiny may find.

Reflection on God

You will know well, if you have been listening to these podcasts, that I encourage us always to reach past categories of people, division of any kind, be they racial or religious, of gender, or of nationality, and to search out that which unites us, as opposed to the differences that separate us. Our differences add to the richness of our united community, they need not serve as barriers.

In like manner, I see the concept of the divine as an existing, unknowable continuum, developing and exploring in the same way that we do, dancing with us in some way, as close as our heartbeat, and as intimate, and yet, simultaneously, gloriously large and past our grasp. I suppose if I had to try and define God, I would simply say, that god is all that we are not, and yet we somehow, are connected to in a profound way.

In the Song of Faith, the poetic theological writing from the United church, it is written.

God is Holy Mystery, beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description.
Yet, in love, the one eternal God seeks relationship.....

And in addressing the naming God, I do love this wonderful writing in reference to the Song of Faith. It mirrors my own understanding of the nature, the being of God.

It reads, “We employ and honour the traditional image of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), but also offers other images, such as Mother, Friend, Comforter, Source of Life, Living Word, Bond of Love. Words are a significant means of understanding and relating to the Holy, and the statement of faith recognizes the adequacy of *all* images or metaphors that speak faithfully of “the One on whom our hearts rely.” However, the first designation of God in the statement of faith, that of Holy Mystery, serves as a reminder that all subsequent attempts to name the Divine are simply that—*attempts* to describe a reality that is always greater than human language can encompass.” <https://www.shelburneprimrose.com/about#values>

“The one on whom our hearts rely”, that is a beautiful, beautiful phrase to try and capture that which we cannot.

Just before I came to work for the pastoral charge, I experienced the third heartbreak of my life. I don't speak lightly of heartbreak. If you have experienced one yourself, you will know one never recovers completely from them. But then, that of course, is the idea. You are broken open in some way, humbled, exposed. But heartbreaks I have come to see are one of the ways the divine spirit teaches us, so if you are going through a heart break, something that has really shaken your very core, know that in the midst of it, there is something profound to be acknowledged, and you will serve the world better for having accepted it.

Psalm 91 came to me in this challenging period and I awoke every morning for several weeks and read it over and over until I thought I could manage through the day. It is a profoundly healing psalm, very God focused, a powerful tool to make your way through any difficulty. And that to me, is a foundational piece of the divine. It is eternal, solid, ever present, ever waiting to take our heartbroken selves in tender embrace. I have never, ever known it to fail when turned to in humility and a willingness to be healed.

Just the other day, while I was at the church Norma Godbold stopped by to fill in one of our registers, and she spoke to me about the unexpected and sudden death of her mother when Norma was twenty-five years old. Norma was close to her mother, and deeply grieved her loss. But she held steady to her faith, even in her terrible sorrow. And then, she told me, one day she heard again Psalm 23, and when it spoke of death “yeah, though I walk through the valley of death I will fear no evil”, she experienced a wonderful warmth and loveliness that words cannot describe. And she felt a peace with both her mother's death, and death in general. This is how God heals, this is how God teaches - unexpectedly, surprisingly, when you least see it coming towards you. This is the hand of the divine, the element of the unexpected arrival, all part of the mystery that is our God.

In my experience, God is always present, though so often I am not. God is always waiting to heal, though I am not always willing to be healed. God is always tender, though very real heartbreak can push you to the limits of your strength. God serves life and love, and when we put ourselves in God's care, the miraculous is possible.

Psalm 91, *On Eagle's Wings*, Music and Lyrics: Michael Joncas, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist

You who dwell in the shelter of God,
Abide in His shadow for life
Say to the Lord, "My refuge, my rock in whom I trust!"

I will raise you up on eagles' wings
And bear you on the breath of dawn
Make you to shine like the sun
And hold you in the palm of my hand.

The snare of the fowler will never capture you
Famine will bring you no fear
Under God's wings your refuge,
His faithfulness your shield

And I will raise you up on eagles' wings
Bear you on the breath of dawn
Make you to shine like the sun
And hold you in the palm of my hand.

You need not fear the terror of the night
The arrow that flies by day
Though thousands fall about you,
near you it shall not come

And I will raise you up on eagles' wings
Bear you on the breath of dawn
Make you to shine like the sun
And hold you in the palm of my hand

For to God's angels is given a command to guard you in all your ways
Upon their hands they will bear you up lest your dash your foot against a stone.

And I will raise you up on eagles' wings
Bear you on the breath of dawn
Make you to shine like the sun
And hold you in the palm of my hand

And hold you in the palm of my hand

And hold you in the palm of my hand

About Jesus

I have loved Jesus as long as I can remember. It was like loving my Grandmother Jane, it was a love that was there before I understood what it was or who he was. And in a way, my Scottish grandmother had a lot to do with me loving Jesus because she was what my friend Andy calls 'a muscular Christian' which is a high compliment. Grandma Jane was beautiful, clever, and as they said about the American saint, Dorothy Day, 'She lived as though God was real and the gospels were true.' I loved her and she loved God and Jesus. And I wanted to do everything she did.

And I loved the church because the local church where I grew up always smelled like delicious things were cooking in it, and happy things were going on, there was a sound to it I liked, the sound of people – mostly women – talking and laughing. The minister was from Glasgow, like my beloved grandmother, and he had the same heavy brogue that she did. To this day, I still think that If God were a man and If God were talking, then he would absolutely have the thick Scottish accents of working-class Glasgow folk. And you know, when they say things, it really does sound irrefutable.

There were it seemed to me, endless rooms in the church, space to run and explore. There was Brownies and Girl Guides on Wednesdays, choir on Thursdays, movies on Saturday afternoons, and Sunday school on Sabbath mornings. It was the third space where I lived as a child. Home. School. Church. Home had its challenges. School too. But the church was where Jesus lived, and there, there was a kind of peacefulness in the midst of all the moving about and noise. I loved church and I loved Jesus.

But childhood does not last. And eventually, I, and the world around me, began to question matters at the church. What was all this business about Jesus coming back to life? We lived in the age of science, and that was clearly impossible. The miracles started to seem a bit suspect, as did the whole dried bread and grape juice being flesh and blood. Jesus was in the middle of all this confusing, improbable mess, so I decided I would go straight to the source – God – and deal directly to the top man – as I then thought of God. I left Jesus behind because somehow, it just all seemed embarrassing - too many questions with no answers. And worse, no one wanted

to talk about any of it. I would simply here, “Jesus is the son of God” as if that answered all queries. But to an inquiring mind, that was not an answer, just a doorway to more questions.

One of the key matters that drove me to seminary, was that I had never heard anyone explain the oft repeated phrase, ‘Jesus died for our sins’. No matter who I asked, there was no explanation that made the foggiest sense whatever. I had returned to church by then, Bruce and I having been married in a United Church in Toronto, the minister being our back door neighbour. I had renewed my love of a bustling place of women doing things together, and having fun doing it. But Jesus still seemed problematic to me. We circled around one another for quite some time before I fell in love again. I think that is why we lose so many young people from the church. We fail to acknowledge the expanding of their own spirituality and do not respond to the deep questions this brings about.

So, in the end are a few things I know about Jesus, among all the things that I don’t, what I wonder, and what I question. And this helps me to hold the love for him I had in my youth without sacrificing the experience and intelligence of adulthood.

Jesus’ last name is not Christ for starters. That is a title. Jesus THE Christ. As in Jesus The Messiah. Jesus The One We Have Decided to Follow Because His way of Love makes sense to Us.

Jesus was a real person who lived in a certain time of history. Christ is the spirit of that man who can and does live within anyone who does things in love, and so, is both eternal and accessible at all times to all people. Jesus was born in the Jewish faith and was absorbed in the Christian faith. But the spirit of Christ is not bound by the borders of religions. Though it is true that the Christian faith is unique in gathering around his teachings, both his teachings and his spirit are available to everyone within our formal faith and without. And that is Jesus’ teaching embedded as it is in the gospel stories.

Jesus understood he was beloved. But what is more amazing to me, is that having been gifted this piece of information, he immediately understood that this was true for everyone and set about sharing that knowledge. That is why we call him the son of God. Not because of any biological ties or otherwise, but because his heart was so big and his wisdom so extensive that he could not think to do otherwise than to share his own profound spiritual experience. This never ceases to amaze me.

I had been able to bring real life problems to Christ – that is to Jesus in the spirit – and his voice, which I know as well as my own, has only compassion within it. Contempt is unknown to the Christ. That is a human invention, one we have perfected. It does not exist in either Jesus, or his teachings, or his spirit.

I know that if I follow Jesus, I will not go wrong. I don't always follow the path he lays down before me. But I always want to.

When I don't, he waits patiently for me at the crossroads where I left him behind. And when I come back to him, we walk in companionable silence that is peace itself.

Where He Leads Me, Music/Lyrics: Twyla Paris, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist

There's a great, broad road, through the meadow,
And many travel there,
But I have a gentle Shepherd,
I would follow anywhere,
Up a narrow path, Through the mountains,
To the valley far below,
To be ever in His presence,
Where He leads me I will go.
Where He leads me I will go.

There are many wondrous voices,
Day and night they fill the air,
But there's one so small and quiet,
I would know it anywhere,
In the city or the wilderness,
There's a ringing crystal clear,
To be ever close beside Him,
When He calls me, I will hear.
When He calls me, I will hear.

There is a great, broad road to nowhere,
And many travel there,
But I have a gentle Shepherd,
I would follow anywhere,
Though the journey take me far away,
From the place I call my home,
To be ever in His presence,
Where He leads me I will go.
Where He leads me I will go.
Where He leads me I will go.
Where He leads me I will go.

Theology of Glory, Theology of the Cross

Do you ever wonder what it was like standing at the foot of the cross? I do. I wonder what it was like for Mary, Jesus' mother. I wonder what it was like for the disciples, for Jesus' friends, for his followers, for the soldiers, for the passersby. I wonder what it was like for the temple priests, for Pilot and his crew, for the Pharisees and the Sadducees, some of whom may have been off having dinner while Jesus waited to die on a cross, pondering, as he must have, all he had done, all he had believed in. But I think too, there must have some who considered their part in the crucifixion, who wondered at the cracks that were emerging within their faith tradition, wondered if the scriptures they read were the ones their leaders were following.

There are two basic competing theologies in Christianity. Well, there are lots of them, of course, but there are two main ones that seem to be in opposition with one another. And in the end, you have to choose which one you will live with.

The first one is a theology of glory. That is the one that waves the big Christian flag, tells of the glorious power of our faith, how it can conquer all of our errant ways, how everyone really should come and join our triumphant parade.

I have never felt comfortable with that particular interpretation of our faith, though the statements themselves may hold much truth.

I feel more comfortable with the theology of the cross – the place where we stand in solidarity with all the blood and mess and disarray and uncertainty that would have been found in Jesus' dying. It is an understanding of God that finds itself standing at the foot of the cross, in the real life of disappointment, failure and uncertainty, holding to love and the fact that there are things yet to be revealed, that we may, or may not, understand.

It has never mattered to me one bit how or if Jesus was resurrected in a bodily sense. There are some people who would claim that you can't be a real Christian if you don't believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I am not one of them. Resurrection can come in many forms, much more real than a body. And the power of a person's spirit is a potent matter, not easily dismissed, then or now. I am not the only one who feels this way, as the differing accounts of the spirit of Christ are spoken of in our gospel stories.

When I am in doubt about anything, I find my way to the foot of Jesus' cross, in solidarity with all those who wept, who were afraid, who were unsure of the way forward. And there, I am comforted by the steadfastness in the face of uncertainty. And there, I can stand in solidarity with Jesus and know that he stands in solidarity with imperfect me, imperfect all of us, and

here, I can say, he is for me, so much in union with the divine spirit, that I can claim him as the son of God.

Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross, Instrumental, Music: William Howard Doane, 1869, Arranger: Bruce Ley, 2020.

Ah, yes, now where does humanity come into our theology, for it surely must. We cannot talk of the study of God, of Jesus, of our faith, and neglect humanity and how it all ties together. That is, I suppose, the place of what we call the holy spirit – the voice, the sense, the knowings that tie everything all together.

It was a profound moment in my own faith story when it occurred to me one day that God did not have a body. That sounds odd, I know, because of course that seems obvious. But somehow, I had never tied that all together before.

I had come to understand the idea of the largess of God. And the importance of the divine spirit living through the man Jesus, and embodying God in a particular time and place. But the holy spirit was still vague to me, something I was not too sure about. We don't talk about the holy spirit much in the reform tradition. I had to go elsewhere for that to be a popular topic.

How and when and to whom the spirit speaks is another mystery, but that it does is not to be refuted. In scientific research, they say that if some new fact or understanding comes from a wide variety of circumstances that are unrelated, then their truthfulness must be examined. And the ways of the spirit are too numerous, from too many sources, over centuries of time, to be lain aside without examination.

But in our faith tradition, because Jesus is such a central figure in our stories, in our ethics, it is so often at his personal urging, and in his personal way, that the spirit may speak to us. And as I grow older, perhaps in the circle of life I turn back to the love of my childhood, which was then and is now, Jesus.

This is as much a surprise to me as anyone. Because it is easier to speak of God – which at the very least people can speak about in general, philosophic terms. But Jesus is particular. And only those who love him, can understand that his memory has a warmth, and goodness to it, that does not exist anywhere else – well, at least not for me.

So many of the great theologians of our faith, who wrote and studied and taught, arrived at the end of their lives, as they were at the beginning – childlike in their faith, with all their accomplishments nothing more than notes on a page, their real faith having sunk down deep within them to something simple, something childlike.

I don't know if you do this, but sometimes I keep things – cards, photos, pictures, quotes - for a long time without understanding their meaning, or their importance to me. And it is so, with this piece of writing from Thomas Merton, that is pasted to the inside of the front of a notebook of mine. He writes:

“When we find the truth that shapes our lives, we have found more than an idea. We have found a Person. We have come upon the actions of One Who is still hidden, but Whose work proclaims Him holy and worthy to be adored. And I Him we also find ourselves.”

This has been so for me.

I have travelled a long way understand my faith of birth, a long way to glimpse the larger view of a God that embraces the wholeness of things. But in the end, I come back to my original love, and that is, plain and simply Jesus.

It makes no sense. But. There it is.

Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus, Music/Lyrics: Helen Lemmel, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist (note: Adjusted lyrics, Candice Bist)

Oh soul are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There's light for a look at the Savior
And life more abundant and free.

Oh, turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

Through death into life everlasting
He passed and we follow Him there
For sin it no longer need bind us
We dwell in his goodness and care.

So turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

He promised his word would not fail us,
And his is a story to tell,
Go out in the world, do not fear it,
Trust him, and all will be well,

Oh, turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace

Closing

So, that was quite the parade on Wednesday afternoon – so many of you honking up a storm on an icy, grey afternoon, shouting out to me and dropping off cards and gifts, it was really a wonderful surprise. The day began with Ken and Gwynn arriving with the beautiful charcuterie board from everyone at Primrose – with all your signatures on the bottom. And so many, many cards with beautiful notes and little gifts. And the beautiful shawl, and very generous gift of money, so, so, so thoughtful. Bruce and I both were deeply touched by your many kindnesses. And in the strange way that the spirit gifts us, it is making the leaving somehow easier, sweeter, and more hopeful for all of us. So, thank you, thank you, thank you.

We are going to close with a beloved hymn, one that Bruce and I adore, really, what I call a foundational hymn of faith. It was a special request at my ordination so many years ago now, and I think is often requested by other ministers. But in the reform tradition, as you may be tired of me telling you, we are ‘the priesthood of all believers’ and you are all ministers in your own little spheres of dwelling.

I suppose, if I could say I had a personal ambition as a minister, I would be that I wanted everyone to understand their calling as a minister in their own little world. Because that is how I think of all of you, as ministers working through your understandings of God and Jesus and scripture and the ways of the spirit exactly where you live and work and care for others. As all ministers do, you will have your natural gifts in different areas, social justice issues that speak directly to you, and areas too, that challenge your faith, an where you may stumble. But just as God is steadfast and ever merciful, so will you be. And just as Jesus is compassionate and filled with grace, so will you be. And just as the spirit goes where it will, seeking places to uplift and guide at the calling of the divine, so you will do likewise. For all these things you are called to do, and are now doing, and will continue to do.

Next week, in my final podcast, we will chat about the future of the church, and what you have all taught me that I take with me in my leaving. Bruce and I wish you every blessing as the New Year begins. I am sure there will be adventures to be had in 2021, but for now, try to stay home as much as possible, which is the responsible thing to do. And be kind to yourself and all those in your care.

Be thou My Vision

Be Thou my vision, O joy of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art;
Thou my best thought, by day or by night;
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be though my battle shield, sword for the fight,
Be thou my dignity, thou my delight,
Thou my soul's shelter, thou my high tower
Raise thou me heavenward, O power of my power.

Be thou my wisdom, my calm in all strife,
I ever with thee, and thou in my life,
Though loving parent, thy child may I be,
Thou in me dwelling and I one with thee.

Riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise;
Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and Thou only, the first in my heart;
Great God of Heaven, my treasure Thou art.

Great God of Heaven, after victory won;
May I reach heaven's joys, bright heaven's sun!;
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall;
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.