

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

Welcome

Peace be with you, true and real peace, the kind that is beyond all understanding. Peace is what we particular crave at this moment in history, the kind of peace that allows us to stay calm and centred in the middle of whatever is being offered up on the news, the kind of peace that does not let our fears overwhelm, and our better judgement elude us.

I am Rev. Dr. Candice Bist and along with my wonderful husband Bruce Ley, musician extraordinaire, we serve the Primrose Shelburne Pastoral Charge in southern Ontario. We are currently ensconced in our home at the end of a dead-end road, scouring the garden for the last of the potatoes and swiss chard before we head into the white quietness that is the Canadian winter. And it is bound to be a challenging one for all of us.

Everything in the news in some way relates to the work the church is called to do – which is to bring peace and healing into this world. Currently the numbers of covid 19 cases continues to rise locally and internationally, 74 refugees drown at sea attempting to reach safety in Europe, hundreds of civilians are slaughtered in Ethiopia's Tigray Region in a worsening humanitarian crisis, the ceasefire between Morocco and the Eastern Sahara ends, and political unrest and protests throughout the world are disturbing. Each of us will have particularly trials. Travel is limited. Visiting is dangerous. Isolation can be dangerous too.

And we are living through the residual of the chaotic election south of our border and the images of war and violence that emerge in the media and in our consciousness around Remembrance Day. It may be a day we dedicate to peace, but sadly, what stays with us are the images of bloodied soldiers, and perhaps more visceral, the feeling of impotence that can lay us low, the experience that the problems are too large, and we are too small to manage them.

It is important, then to remind ourselves that in all spiritual work, and if you are listening to this podcast, then you are involved in spiritual work – we begin in exactly the place where we are, we ground ourselves in the reality of our world just as it is, in our moment, in our time. And from there, reflecting on your own situation, to move in a chosen direction.

If you are drawn to the life and teachings of Jesus, or for that matter, to the teachings of any who calls you to live by the rules of the deep magic, then you will know that all the upset that swirls around us, is unearthing marvelous opportunities of insight. A new worldview is being born. The Black Lives Matter movement – so overdue, but here it is at last, shining a light on our inherent racism. The calls for a re-examination of the democratic system, liberal politics, the enormous discrepancy in wealth distribution, the importance of taking an active part in political life, of

taking seriously our commitment to restoring balance to our ecosystem, and at the base of it all, the shift in our worldview that sees humans not as separate entities, but as a woven tapestry, rich in colour, rich in diversity, rich in possibility.

The grounding spiritual principle of all matter, all situations, all people, is unity. Humanity, nature, the universe, all one. Heaven and earth, one. You and I, one.

And another grounding principle is that when we seek goodness, when we seek compassion, when we move boldly in a new direction of enlightenment, when we gather our courage and fearlessly go forth, not knowing what lies ahead, only knowing we must leave what we have behind, God and all the angels and the stars and the entire universe are there to cheer us on.

Hear Isaiah's bold proclamation, for you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." (Isaiah 55: 12

Deep in the heart of God, in the heartbeat of this world, is a common vision, and it is one of peace and joy for everyone. We are called to move toward that peace from exactly the place where our feet are now. Every blessing for the journey, so glad you are with us today.

***Deep in Our Hearts*, Music: John Oldham, Lyrics: John Oldham, Artist: Bruce Ley/Candice Bist**

Deep in our hearts there is a common vision;
Deep in our hearts there is a common song;
Deep in our hearts there is a common story,
telling Creation that we are one.

Deep in our hearts there is a common purpose;
Deep in our hearts there is a common goal;
Deep in our hearts there is a sacred message,
justice and peace in harmony.

Deep in our hearts there is a common longing;
Deep in our hearts there is a common theme;
Deep in our hearts there is a common current,
flowing to freedom like a stream.

Deep in our hearts there is a common vision;
Deep in our hearts there is a common song;
Deep in our hearts there is a common story,
telling Creation that we are one.

Introduction to the Call to Worship and Opening Prayer

This last week I was viewing some of the Fresh Start zoom services from Kingsway Lambton United Church. These shortened, informal services offer insightful teaching and prayers that reflect their intention to offer a spiritually for the way we are living now. So, a shout out to Rev. Leanne Ketcham and her team at Kingsway Lambton who are offering inventive, meaningful worship during the pandemic. Our UCC's newly appointed General Secretary, Michael Blair, was recently a visiting guest on Fresh Start, and I have posted that service on our website. It is well worth viewing.

In one of the programs Rev. LeeAnn drew my attention to her chosen call to worship from Wild Goose Publications. Wild Goose is the publishing house of the Iona Community, based in Glasgow, and also on Iona, a small island of the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland. I don't know if any of you know of this very special community, or perhaps have been lucky enough to visit in the past. Their contribution to the interfaith movement, while simultaneously calling Christians to dig deeper into their own faith, is legendary. I am so hoping that before I leave this world, I can stand in the Iona Abbey. I am sure I will only be able to weep in gratitude. The fullness of Iona consists of a dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship. Their publications are created to bring about personal and political transformation. And I think that is the purpose of our calls to worship and our prayers, so with grateful thanks to Wild Goose, the Iona Community, Kingsway Lambton, and all the folk throughout the world who work towards peace and reconciliation, leaning into their own personal faith, as they lean outwards towards political activism in the public sphere.

Call to Worship

Gather us in,
the lost and the lonely,
the broken and breaking,
the tired and the aching
who long for the nourishment found at your feast.

Gather us in,
the done and the doubting, the wishing and wondering, the puzzled and pondering who long for
the company found at your feast.

Gather us in,
the proud and pretentious, the sure and superior,
the never inferior,
who long for the levelling found at your feast.

Gather us in,
the bright and the bustling, the stirrers, the shakers,
the kind laughter makers who long for the deeper joys found at your feast.

Gather us in
from corner or limelight, from mansion or campsite, from fears and obsession, from tears and
depression, from untold excesses, from treasured successes, to meet, to eat, be given a seat,
be joined to the vine, be offered new wine, become like the least, be found at the feast.

Gather us in.

Prayer

Creator God, Beloved Father and Mother of all there is,

When we quiet ourselves we know that heaven is here, and earth,
and the space is thin between them.

Distance may divide,
but Christ's promise unites
those bounded by time,
those blessed by eternity.
we are glad and all the whole earth and all those in it to cry glory.

Heaven is here, and earth,
and the Church above and below is one. Peter is here, and Paul,
Martha and all the Marys,
the saints from far back
and those who left us not so long ago.
And only sight prevents us
from seeing them,
one with us on the other side.
Let heaven be glad,
we are glad and all the whole earth and all those in it to cry glory.

Heaven is here, and earth,
And God, you made them all and you are present with us,

Christ is glories on the throne,
and yet, he sits beside us;
the your spirit, the Dove,

makes her resting place among us.

You inhale the breath of our prayers and spread a table for our satisfaction.

Let the heaven be glad.

And May the whole world and all who are in it, cry glory, glory, glory.

Blessing and honour and glory and power be to you, our God for ever and ever.

Reflection on What is Going on in the World

The lyrical bit of scripture I quoted from the book of Isaiah earlier, comes from the writer's imaginative, encouraging vision for the people of Israel during a time that was anything but peaceful. Uplifting the people was a key part of the job of the ancient prophets. They offered visual pictures, poetry, spiritual incentives, their very lives as models, to draw people's attention back to the divine spiritual principles that undergird all life. In their language, the prophets drew people's attention back to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And remember that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were men who had failed in spectacular ways, but who were bold in their pursuit, however flawed, to seek out the divine spirit. We have here a God who is faithful to boldness to those who seek after what is unknown.

The prophets were such men.

In our tradition the prophets did not only encourage people in their personal transformation, but they had the distinct calling to criticize their own religion. The prophets loved their tradition, but as they examined the practices of their faith, the leadership, the direction, the ethics, they were also free to criticize it at the same time. There is this thought today, that to want change in the church, change in the world, which most certainly causes disruption, is a move from orderliness, and somehow not in keeping with our faith.

But it is quite the opposite. If we hold our tradition as valuable, we will call to account anything that is not constantly moving towards unity, goodness, joyfulness for all people.

Jesus, following in the footsteps of John the Baptist, declared himself to be part of the prophetic tradition – someone who loved his Hebrew faith, and following the prophets before him, was free to call the priests to account, to call the people to account, to call for dramatic shifts in how people worshiped, prayed, and were in relationship with one another.

That tradition continues today – through the prophets, through Jesus, and through us. So, here is our call to action.

Lyrics: Candice Bist

Well, here we are all gathered 'round the table,
Lines on the map where we think that they should be,
Each one comes into the room with their own agenda,
Each one tied up with their own (country's) history
How can we put aside all the things we find that are different?
Look through the lens of the other's point of view
How can we learn to wait upon the silence, In me and you.

When we stare across the abyss of deep affliction,
Gentle questions hint at what we may know as true
We need to lay aside all our clever tools and weapons,
And simply ask, hey what are you going through?
How can we empty out our soul to receive another
In the truth and wholeness that speaks to us a new,
How can we learn to wait upon the wisdom, In me and you.

No, Waiting doesn't seem to be our strong suit,
We want to go and do and run this endless race,
But in the end it leaves us worn out and isolated,
Unable to see the cloud of collective grace.

So wait, attend, and look into the face before you
And no matter how hard it is, force yourself to stay,
Let the stream of love that flows on undiminished
Grant the strength to regard the mirror and not turn away
Love demands a gaze that is strong and steady
You know the quick and furtive glance just won't do,
So sit and wait and look upon the beauty,
That's me and you.

***State of Grace*, Music: Bruce Ley, Lyrics: Candice Bist, Artist: Bruce Ley**

Introduction to Scripture

Our scripture today is from the 25th chapter of Mathew, verses 14 – 30, a parable Jesus offers towards the end of a long section of teaching about the kingdom of God. There is a kind of lazy exegetical work that listens to a parable, superimposes Jesus or God onto the main character, and

then logically concludes that the master, or land holder, or leader is divine, and therefore we understand the nature of God, from the nature of the protagonist.

This is an error. And you may see it particularly well here. Note that the master who doles out enormously large amounts of cash to his slaves so they can increase his already substantial wealth, while he supposedly goes off somewhere else to acquire further wealth, is not a model of spiritual leadership. He is actually a larger than life character, painted with a broad stroke, in divisive language to make a point. This is a typical story telling device in many of Jesus' parables. The characters are almost cartoon like – bright, simple creatures, they draw attention to some important aspect of the spiritual life that Jesus wishes to highlight. And here, he wishes to highlight the importance of boldness, imagination, going forth even when we don't feel we have the expertise or the skills to do what we are called to do.

Second Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time, the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest. So, take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Reflection

Goodness, weeping and gnashing of teeth – that sounds bad. But don't worry, Jesus uses that expression several times in his teaching. In the stylistic way of exaggerated story telling he is simply adding more cartoon like images to the picture he is painting. He wants to make this simple point:

Go forth in boldness with whatever you have in your possession to flourish in this world, to see what your little talents, your little effort might yet bring of richness to offer to others.

Take what you have been given, and make the most of it in this little slice of eternity in which you dwell, because when you see what little you have as all you need, and you can offer it in faith, and then the divine spirit will fan it into a multitude of miracles.

We sometimes tend to think of Jesus as a timid creature, confusing humility with smallness of mind. Not so.

Jesus was bold. Jesus was free to criticize the traditions in his faith because he was also willing to go forth, with only what he had on hand, and call, in the prophetic tradition, for change. As you will know by his eventual crucifixion, going up against the priests, the leaders, the tradition, the way things are, ended in what seemed like disaster. But that was not the end of the story. We are not called to live Jesus' life, so you don't have to fear for crucifixion, but we are called to follow in his footsteps, which means, your call for change may not be well received. Well, that is just fine. You are firmly ensconced in the prophetic tradition of Christianity and in very fine company.

Do you know Goethe's wonderful quote on boldness? He writes, "Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Goethe was a prolific protestant German poet, writer, and statesman born in the mid 18th century and living well into the 19th. He criticized the church, even as he admired the ethics and tenets of his faith and offered expanded thought of how we might live out that ethic in ways more focused on the God that represents life, goodness, love. Goethe was prophetic. He was bold. He took the talent he was given and did not hide it away.

Our prophetic voices call us forth to action. They model for us a new direction. This last week Lucille Bridges died, a prophet if ever there was one. Lucille was the mother Ruby Bridges, the first African American child to attend an all-white school in 1960 in New Orleans. In the process of accompanying her daughter to school, Lucille's family endured death threats and racially inspired hatred. But Lucille took her talent and offered it into the world. She was a mother of a child entering the first grade, and yet, with this simple, ordinary, everyday event, she became a political activist as is her daughter Ruby today. Ruby has said in interviews that she became an

activist on her first day of grade one even though at the time she had no idea what racism was all about. For an entire year, white parents refused to send their children to the school, and Ruby, with her wonderful, brave teacher Barbara Henry, sat just the two of them, learning together in the otherwise empty classroom. The extraordinary child psychologist Dr. Robert Cole, a devoted Catholic, visited with Ruby on a weekly basis, impressed by her personal faith, and won a Pulitzer prize for his writing on the powerful, spiritual lives of children, deeply influenced by one, six-year-old child. Think of Ruby and her mother Lucille, her teacher, Barbara, the psychologist, Robert. Think on their stepping forth and all that followed. And think then, on all those parents who could not or did not step forward in faith. Doesn't it seem sad to you, that they all missed this wonderful opportunity to embrace a new way of being?

The picture of Ruby on her first day of school, surrounded as she was by federal Marshalls, was immortalized in 1964 by Norman Rockwell in his famous painting, *The Problem we All Live With*. It is an imaging of Ruby on her first day of school, surrounded by the federal marshals, as well as the rotten fruit and racial slurs hurled at her. And you may well imagine, that those who were doing the hurling, called themselves Christians.

Up until that point, Rockwell had been painting for the *Saturday Evening Post*, pictures of American family life. But he grew frustrated with not having the freedom to paint scenes that reflected his growing social interests which included civil rights and racial integration. So, he left the place he had worked for over forty years and went to work elsewhere so he could have the freedom to be involved in the political work of the sixties he felt was so important. Rockwell took his considerable talent and offered it to the civil rights movement as gift, going on to paint the iconic, "New kids in the neighborhood" and *Blood Brothers*.

This last weekend, an Instagram released by Ruby Bridges, that little girl depicted in Rockwell's painting, exploded in popularity. It is an image of two generations of trailblazing women who together in an image that went viral over the weekend. The artwork shows Vice President-elect Kamala Harris dressed in dark suit and heels, carrying a black bag and striding purposefully ahead past a wall. But when you look again, you see the shadow Harris casts on the wall isn't her own, but that of Ruby Bridges, who was just 6 years old when she integrated the previously all-white Elementary School in New Orleans.

The message is immediately clear: Harris didn't get to the White House alone. Her path was carved over decades by those, like Bridges, who fought for civil rights. Each takes their talent and uses it in their own life.

Bold. Prophetic. Each taking their talents fearlessly out into the world.

John Lennon and Yoko Ono were prophets as well. Yes, they were. They were mocked for the simplicity of their message. War is over if you want it, they plastered on massive billboards.

They marched in the protests against the Vietnam war. They protested against the practice of nuclear bomb testing. You may remember that they spent their honeymoon in a hotel in Montreal in bed, calling the world to give peace a chance. The media laughed, as they so often do at prophets. We don't like to be confronted with simple messages that call us back to being people of God. It is easier to make fun of what is too difficult to confront. The boldness of others often calls out condemnation as a counter move.

John released his iconic song, Imagine in 1971. It was controversial then, and still today, because of its request to imagine a world with no religion. It is strange that Christians should find this controversial because it is exactly what Jesus was calling people to – calling them to leave behind the religiosity of the temple rules, to release them from the tight corset of the parasitical way of thinking that left no room for the spirit of god to work. In an interview years after the song Imagine was released, Lennon, admitted that the lyrics were really from his wife Yoko, and the song, though listed as his own, was a collaborative effort, the lyrics immersing from Yoko's book of poetry entitled Grapefruit, with its focus on imagining a different future. Yoko tells a wonderful story of discovering the world of imagining when she was four years old. She and her family were living in Japan, through the time of the second world war and the heavy bombing of her country by the Americans. Her family fled to the countryside, where there was very little to eat. Her younger brother normally a cheerful toddler, was unhappy. When she asked him what the trouble was, he said he was hungry. She did not have any food to give him. But she drew him into a game of imagination where they set a large table and a feast before themselves. And as she watched his sorrow turn to joy and excitement at the unseen feast they had created together, she knew, at age four, the power of imagination. And years later, she offered that same power to her singer songwriter husband. Who would then offer it into the world to be one of the most recorded and beloved songs of the 20th century?

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace.

We are called to imagine. We are called to be bold. We are called to risk. And never more so than today, right here and now where we live and breathe and have our faith.

Imagine all the people, living life in peace.

***Imagine*, Music/Lyrics: John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Artist: Bruce Ley**

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace
You, you may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you will join us
And the world will be as one
Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world
You, you may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you will join us
And the world will live as one

Announcements

We are coming to our year end, both in the Christian year, and in our Gregorian calendar. Next week marks the last day of our liturgical year with the Reign of Christ, or Feast of Christ Sunday. And then the following Sunday, on November 29th we begin the season of Advent that leads us into the twelve days of Christmastide. In no time at all it will be December 31st, and the year 2020 will be over.

Both your councils continue to imagine ways to serve in the community. The churches will not be open for the rest of the year, so we will have to reimagine our Christmas celebration. But we will continue to be faithful to our calling to bring good into this world, to explore our spirituality in the time and place where we live, and following in the footsteps of our prophets, both dead and living, sanctified and familiar, to walk boldly forth, unafraid to question the status quo in our places of worship and our places of business, in our personal sphere, and in the public sphere. Be bold. Be fearless. imagine all the people living life in peace. The spirit of Christ is there to support you all the live long day.

Commissioning/Prayer

I close with the full quote from Goethe to encourage your boldness in going forth with your talent, which is to say, your life and whatever it is that is in it. And also, to tie it back to the prophetic voice of Isaiah, his beautiful, full vision. Our closing prayer comes to us in the form of music, For the Healing of the Nations.

Goethe Quote:

“Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness concerning all acts of initiative and creation. There is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: That the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too.

All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no person could have dreamed would come their way. Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.”

Isaiah 55: 66 - 12

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;

⁷ let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

¹² For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

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

For the healing of the nations,
Lord, 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.