

Music: *Now the Green Blade Rises*, Music: Medieval French Carol, Arranger/Musician: Bruce Ley

Welcome

Peace be with you this beautiful September week, with the frost creeping into our gardens, and the trees beginning to show off their beautiful fall colours.

I am Rev. Dr. Candice Bist and along with my husband, Bruce Ley, we serve the Shelburne Primrose Pastoral Charge in southern Ontario. And this week, along with the last of the podcasts being repeated from the high holidays of Easter week, we are gathering for the first time in Primrose United Church, following all the proper social distancing protocols of course. We will be meeting at 10 am, and if you would like to come to the service, you will find details on our website at shelburneprimrose.com.

Our podcast today, is the podcast that aired last Easter morning, full of music and beautiful readings, and a simple message: Love is the conduit for the miraculous. It was true last Easter, and it is true this September as well.

In many Christian denominations we are in the liturgical season of creation, a time to reflect on the beauty of nature and our responsibility to be kindly caregivers of our precious ecosystem, which is currently in so much peril. We may begin by simply taking in the beauty that surrounds us at this time of year and contemplate the gifts that are given us daily for which we have not contributed, only received: the sunrise, the sunset, the frost tipping the trees and enlivening their rich colours, the roadsides alive with the yellow and purple of fall wild flowers, the fresh air that seems to bring the promise of new beginnings. And speaking of new beginnings, we offer a blessing for all those returning to school – to teachers and administrators, to children, to parents, who care for the students.. And we hope and pray that as the pandemic continues, there will nevertheless be ways for education to continue.

The opening call to worship at our Easter service was a reflection from Rabbi Lau-Lavie who offers his interpretation of Passover prayers, the Passover, of course, being intricately connected with our Easter story as Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Passover feast before his crucifixion. And in this modern interpretation of a standard Passover Prayer, he sees ‘She Who Persists’, that is the Hebrew phrase, as Mother Earth, so a lovely tie in there with our creation season.

And also, this weekend, September 18th and 19th, marks the Jewish celebration of Rosh Hashanah, the ‘Birthday Party of the Whole World’, it has been called, the New Year celebration in the Jewish faith as their yearlong cycle of scriptural readings begins again. Unlike the kind of New Year celebrations with much drinking and carousing that is often associated with the new year in the secular world, Rosh Hashanah is marked by two days off from work to reflect and consider the previous year, and any misgivings one has about one’s behavior. And, quite naturally, following such consideration, there is desire to reconnect with God and be more inclined to follow in the divine way in the year coming.

You may see people of the Jewish faith saying prayers by bodies of water, throwing pieces of food into the water as a symbolic act of casting off their sins. This is a tradition that began in the middle ages, and it is inspired by a verse from Micah 7: 19.

God will take us back in love
 God will cover up our iniquities
 You, God, will hurl all our sins
 Into the depths of the sea.

So, we wish our Jewish friends Shanah Tova, and all manner of blessings on their new year ponderings and gatherings, such as they will be in our continued time of the on-going pandemic. And we commit also, in solidarity with all people, to look around at the bounty of gifts that are given to us daily, without our asking, without our contribution, gifts from nature which we receive in gratitude.

May we see in the beauty of autumn, the mercy of God and the endless generosity of the natural world.

Music: *What Wonderful Love is This?* Music: American Folk Hymn, Arranger: Bruce Ley, 2020

Call to Worship

Our call to worship comes from Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie from Lab Shul in New York and our opening prayer comes to us from Rev. Richard Bott, the moderator of the United Church of Canada, with my own added variations.

The Jewish faith, and in particular the feast of the Passover is intricately connected with the Christian Easter story. And just as we, in our two churches, have been reflecting on Jesus and his teachings before the development of the Christian faith and the historical monolith known as Christendom, those in other faiths are looking more closely at theirs, and discovering new understandings that find connection outside their specific doctrine. Rabbi Amichai, on reflecting on a beloved Passover tune in his tradition, offers these thoughts for us all.

“Vehi Sheamada is part of the Passover Seder, sung by Jews for generations praising our survival, with so many foes and hardships along the way, saved by God.

What’s missing in most English translations is that the original Hebrew prayer alludes to She Who Persists – who always stood up for our ancestors. This unique and mysterious allusion to the Feminine Divine has intrigued generations of scholars who try to come up with ways to name Her as the Torah, the promise of redemption, the Shechine – Divine Presence.

This year it is clear. She is Mother Earth. Mother Nature. Each and every one of us.

And this prayer is not just for Jews anymore. Not this year. It’s about all of us people.

We, humans, have persisted for generations through so many trials, wars, plagues and famines. We evolve, we're still here, and it's time we honor Mother Earth, our collective being that holds us now with severity and with love.

Can we rise above our fear and divisions, greed and gender, history and arrogance to listen to Her? To band together so we can save ourselves and our planet?

We who survived so many troubles, let us rise together now.

May this Passover - and I will add in here may this Easter - help us heal, bond, build new bridges together, and join hands in the sacred task of healing our planet, our mother, our soul.”

Opening Prayer

Let us pray together....

Gracious God,
You are now and have always been with and part of creation, part of us.

You are with creation, God.
In life —In life-beyond-death.... and this we celebrate today....

You are with us in the brokenness and in the joy,
in the lonely moments of deepest night, in the hope that comes just before dawn, your infinite love overwhelms death – and resurrection changes everything and this we celebrate today....

As we reach out to each other,
from inside the boxes we find ourselves;
know that we are reaching out to you,
knowing that you are always reaching out to us.

As we reach out to each other,
help us to reach into your world,
that we might be people of the Resurrection,
seeing the risen Christ in every grace-filled moment, every day of our lives. And this too we celebrate today....
Amen.

Musical Turn Around

Passing of the Peace:

It is our custom on Easter morning, to share the passing of the peace with one another, to move about our sanctuary and hug and hold one another offering the salutation, May Peace be with you.

Offer it now, to whomever you are with, to whomever you would like to be with, to the world that waits for your greeting.... And let us imagine a world, where Peace and Love and Grace abide.

Music: *Let Love and Grace Abide* **Music:** Bruce Ley **Lyrics:** Candice Bist

Practical Theology: The Spiritual Practice of Gratitude

Our spiritual practice today, and for this week, is the practice of gratitude. And our teacher is Brother Steindl-Rast, who has made of gratitude an art form from which he offers his wisdom. I am grateful to *The Pause*, and *On Being* this particular week for collecting the essence of Brother Steindl-Rast's work on gratitude so I may share it with you. You will find more of Brother Steindl-Rast's work in video on our website. (From *The Pause*, see links below.)

The teaching begins by recognizing that gratitude is a practice, a discipline, "rather than a reaction to what's outside our control. "You can't be grateful for war in a given situation, or violence or domestic violence or sickness. There are many things for which you cannot be grateful," he acknowledges. "But in every moment, you can be grateful."

Brother Steindl-Rast breaks down gratefulness into three steps — what he calls the "stop, look, go" methodology:

- **Stop** is about stepping away from the movement of the world and of your mind. "Most of us [are] caught up in schedules and deadlines and rushing around, and so the first thing is that we have to stop, because otherwise we are not really coming into this present moment at all, and we can't even appreciate the opportunity that is given to us, because we rush by, and it rushes by," he says.
- **Look** means to assess and behold the situation in front of you. We ask, "What is the opportunity of this given moment, only this moment, and the unique opportunity this moment gives?"
- **Go** is the practice of gratefulness that comes from stopping and looking around. "If we really see what the opportunity is, we must, of course, not stop there, but we must do something with it: Go. Avail yourself of that opportunity.

A practice of gratitude is not about dismissing sadness, anger, fear, or confusion. Rather, it offers us the opportunity to see that we often experience multiple feelings at once; to welcome joy into the same places where we hold grief; to turn our attention to what is quietly growing and breathing day by day, which, to our possible surprise, includes ourselves.

Musical Interlude:

Introduction to Scripture Readings

We have two scripture readings this morning with a musical meditation in-between. Our first is from the book of Jeremiah 31: 1 – 6. Jeremiah is so often gloomy, but in this passage, he is a fountain of joyfulness and hope.

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:1-6 NRSV

At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.

Thus says the Lord:

The people who survived the sword

found grace in the wilderness;

when Israel sought for rest,

the Lord appeared to him from far away.

I have loved you with an everlasting love;

therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

Again I will build you, and you shall be built,

O virgin Israel!

Again you shall take your tambourines,

and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.

Again you shall plant vineyards

on the mountains of Samaria;

the planters shall plant,

and shall enjoy the fruit.

For there shall be a day when sentinels will call

in the hill country of Ephraim:

“Come, let us go up to Zion,

to the Lord our God.”

Musical Interlude: *I The Lord of Sea and Sky*, Music: Daniel L. Schutte, Lyrics: Daniel L. Schutte. Note: melody altered, C. Bist

Second Reading: John 20: 1 – 18

Our second reading is from the Book of John. It is a continuation of the scripture that we finished with on Good Friday

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So, she ran and went to Simon Peter and the

other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Brief Reflection: Mary stood weeping.....

(Our short reflection on the above passage is actually something that I offered you last year. I have read and re read the scripture, looking for something fresh and new this year, but try as I do, it is this little jewel that keeps sparring at me – read me, read me, I am the one....so, here she is.....).

The Easter Stories, like the Christmas stories, are told in the style of a parable. That is why the details of the various stories of what happened after Jesus’ death are different, and why, in the end it does not matter.

Because parables are in the business of telling BIG STORIES, BIG TRUTHS, trying to move beyond facts, as all forms of art do, and tell us something that will affect the way we live, the way we see others, the way we understand God.

The important things.

Mary is weeping. Mary is confused. Mary is sorrowful. Because Mary loves deeply.

Mary has an encounter with the angelic. Mary has an encounter with that which is not of this world. Because Mary loves deeply.

Mary is able to speak to Jesus, even though he has died and left this world in the physical way in which she knew him. He calls to her, and she hears him speaking her name. Because Mary loves deeply.

Love is the conduit for the miraculous.

And it is the only one.

It is the passageway through which new possibilities not yet seen emerge. But only those who love have access to them.

The early Christians, the Mary's, the believers, the ones who had encounters with the angelic, who walked and ate and spoke with Jesus, they did so because of the love they bore him.

And that is why the early Christians were called, 'The People of the Way.'

Not the people of God. Not people of the Book. Not people of Jesus.

People of the way. And the way is love.

And love, always has the last word.

Musical Response: *With a Little Love*, Music: Candice Bist, Lyrics: Candice Bist

**Turn your heart towards the light,
Don't stay in the dark,
No need for matches, there's not need,
Love will be your spark.
Gather all your courage,
Gather all your faith,
Reach out with a hopeful heart,
And find your rightful place.**

**With a little love, with a little love, with a little love,
You can shine, shine, shine,
With a little love, with a little love, with a little love,
You can make the whole world shine.**

This is the time in our service where we traditionally collect our tithes and offerings. At Easter, they come in brightly coloured envelopes, our giving a reflection of our gratitude to all that our faith has given to us. And it is always my prayer, at this time, that God will take all that we are,

and all that we will ever be, and use it in this world for good purpose. This is still my prayer. The churches continue to do their work in the community, even with closed buildings, so if you wish to support our work, you will find ways you can do this by visiting our website.

<https://www.shelburneprimrose.com>

As I leaned on Brother Steindl-Rast's wise teaching for our spiritual practice today, in closing our service, I offer to you, his beautiful, beautiful blessing, which stretches out past our own faith tradition – as Jesus did in his time – to offer gift to everyone on this, our most sacred and joyful of days.

“Bless what there is, for being. Whatever it be, bless it because it exists; you need no other reason.

Source of All Blessings,
you bless us with breath —

In and out, in and out, ever-renewing us, ever anew, making us one with all who breathe the same air.

May this blessing overflow into a shared gratefulness, so that with one breath I may praise and celebrate life.

Source of All Blessings,
you bless us with humility —

That down-to-earth quality that has nothing in common with humiliation but makes us stand tall and acknowledge both the humus that feeds us and the stars to which we aspire.

May I learn to practice, and to honor in others, this sparkling humility, which is the dignity that we, as human beings cannot afford to lose.

Source of All Blessings,
you bless us with imprecision —

With all that is vague, close but not quite; all that leaves room for the more specific, the more precise, and room for the imagination.

May I know when to be exact and when to move freely and blessed in the space so generously provided by all that is not perfectly defined, giving full scope to my dreams and my creativity.

Source of All Blessings,
you bless us with memory —

That sacred ingathering of the past that allows us to recognize faces, learn poems by heart, find our way back when we are lost, and bring forth old and new from its nearly inexhaustible store.

May I know what to forget and what to retain and treasure, keeping in mind the smallest kindness shown to me and spreading its ripples for a long time to come.

Source of All Blessings,
you bless us with change —

In the seasons of the year, from snow to greening, flowering, fruiting and harvest, in the seasons of life, from childhood to youth, full ripeness, and saging. All living things keep changing.

May I welcome change as a sacred opportunity to grow and savor in each unrepeatable moment's fleetingness what IS beyond change.

Source of All Blessings,
you bless us with departures —

For they are a necessary part of our journey, necessary for the arriving.”

May I always be ready to take leave, always aware that every arrival is a prelude to departure, every birth a step towards dying, and may I thus taste the blessings of being fully present where I am.

May blessings help to sharpen your taste for the gift of life in its immeasurable facets. May you grow ever more blessed, ever more able to bless.”

And may the love of God, which surpasses all understanding be with you this day,

May the grace and compassion that is the heart of Christ, be alive and well in your heart also,

And may the fellowship and the guidance of the great spirit that moves among us all be with you this day, and all days.

Closing Music: *Oh, Jesus I Have Promised* Music: Angel's Story, Original Lyrics: John Erenst Bode, 1816. Arranger, Bruce Ley 2020, Updated Lyrics: Candice Bist, 2020

With grateful thanks to the sources of wisdom.

Resources, Links, Wisdom Teachers within this podcast.

She Who Persists! Our Passover Blessing for You, <https://labshul.org/she-who-persists-our-passover-blessing-for-you/>

Moderator Online Worship, Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020. Moderator Richard Bott shares that we are Resurrection people and nothing, even a pandemic, can separate us from that.

<https://www.united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/moderators-online-worship-easter-sunday-april-12-2020>

Blessings, with Br. David Steindle-Rast. <https://gratefulness.org/blessings/>

And also,

<https://onbeing.org/programs/david-steindl-rast-how-to-be-grateful-in-every-moment/>