

Soul Boom

John 10:1-10

Parkminster United Church – Sunday, April 30, 2023

Perhaps some of you will remember the television sitcom, *The Office*? I'm thinking of the American version with actors Steve Carrell and Rainn Wilson's very memorable character Dwight Schrute.

Now this isn't going to be a "Gospel according to *The Office*" kind of sermon – but did you know that Rainn Wilson is also a published author with a deep interest in spirituality? His latest book, *Soul Boom: Why We Need a Spiritual Revolution* came out recently and I am part way through it. It's a fun and thoughtful read thus far – and it has really resonated with me as I contemplated this Scripture reading from John's gospel for this week. In fact, this Sunday is sometimes known as "Good Shepherd Sunday" as it features not only the reading from John but also Psalm 23 as part of the lectionary repertoire filled with sheep and shepherd references.

On the inside cover of Wilson's book, readers are invited to reflect on "the trauma that our struggling species has experienced in recent years – because of both the pandemic and societal tensions that threaten to overwhelm us ...In this book, Rainn Wilson explores the possibility and hope for a spiritual revolution, a 'Soul Boom,' to find a healing transformation on both a personal and global level."

He names mental health, racism, sexism, materialism, and climate change among other things that need a spiritual revolution reminding us that the challenges that we face "lie...in every human heart and soul" (p. 41) and that "the keys necessary to this much-needed transformational change can be found in the core of spiritual writings, holy texts, and essential teachings of the various religious faiths throughout history." (p. 42) He invites all people – whether one holds spiritual beliefs or not – to be curious – and to be open to what he calls a "soul-inspired revolution."

And I'm going to be honest – this speaks to my soul on a deeply personal level – but also as a minister. The stories that I have the honour of hearing reflect the many ways we are – as individuals and a community – struggling with transitions and constants in life. Some deeply personal, others on a larger, global scale. It has always been this way. In fact, if I think about the past decade, I'm struck by all the changes I have experienced in my own life– so much so that I was beginning to wonder what – if anything – was constant in life.

For me, some of the tangible changes included jobs, moving, a health scare, and losing both of my parents in the span of a couple of years. My life circumstances had changed rapidly over a span of several years and there did not really seem to be an end in sight.

As a minister, I realized this was the norm; that I was not the only one going through this. All around me, people were experiencing the same kind of things that I was. They were losing loved ones, receiving serious and scary diagnoses, moving from one place to another,

transitioning in their jobs, struggling to make ends meet and trying desperately to find more time to fit it all in.

You would think that knowing that it wasn't just me would make me feel better, but truthfully, it actually made me feel worse! Was this life? Really? A stream of never-ending changes and chaos that just seems to lead to more changes and chaos. Would there ever be a point where the pendulum of life that just seems to swing back and forth and back and forth actually stops and finds rest?

A good friend of mine unexpectedly lost her stepdad this week. As she thanked everyone on social media for their prayers, patience, and love, she remarked that she had "never been so far on this side of grief." As a minister, she mused, we are supposed to be the comforters, not the mourners. "Everything I knew about grief is all so wrong" she told me.

See – this is what I am talking about. Every time we think we have it all figured out, something happens, and we realize that we really are not in control. Life is always going to be full of unexpected changes that sometimes render us powerless and scared and unsure of what to do next and yet somehow, we must find a way not only to cope, but also to move forward.

I suppose life will always be full of changes and transitions at various times both planned and unplanned – in both uplifting and challenging ways. And this is where the blessing of others – of community comes in. For me it was in the words of my wonderful godmother who wisely reminded me, "But Heather – there is a constant." She was right.

As it turns out, I was so focused on the things that define our earthly lives that I forgot that there is that divine presence at work in our lives that is constant. And not only is constant but is malleable and adaptive to the things that do change around us.

And yet so often, this is what we forget. Truth be told, I think that when we are knee deep in the muck of life, trying desperately just to survive, we can forget that we really are not in this alone. God is always with us, love is always with us, the constant presence in our lives.

And we know this, we really do. Psalm 23 begins, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." I would be willing to bet that many of you gathered here today could recite at least the first two or three verses of this psalm. But do we believe it? Do we really, really believe it? When push comes to shove and when the things that define our lives test us in real and stressful and painful and tragic ways, then what? Because when we are just trying to survive, it can be challenging to feel God's presence. Sometimes that presence is felt most deeply through the presence of others when we're in the midst of it. That's why sharing our Joys and Concerns each week is so powerful. It is an opportunity to come together and share where we – where those we love – where our world – is at.

In Nadia Bolz-Weber's book *Pastrix* there is a paragraph that struck a chord with me as I thought about God's presence amidst life's chaos. Nadia wrote:

God is not distant at the cross and God is not distant in the grief of the newly bereaved at the hospital; but instead, God is there in the messy mascara-streaked middle of it.... There simply is no knowable answer to the question of why there is suffering. But there is meaning. And for me that meaning ended up being related to Jesus – Emmanuel – which means “God with us.” We want to go to God for answers, but sometimes what we get is God’s presence.

As right as she is and as much as this is the good news that gives us strength in our lives, this is also the hard truth that so often we want to run away from. Sometimes we do not want to believe that God is crying with us, because we so desperately want God to make things better.

This is the hard stuff that we, as people of faith, absolutely have to wrestle with. Because this is reality; this is real life; these are the real struggles that people are having.

And the church is called to meet people wherever they are on their chaotic and constantly changing journey through life and show them in real and tangible and relevant ways that God is present, that love is present, throughout it all. There is great power and vulnerability in community.

When I read this morning’s gospel reading – where Jesus identified himself as the Good Shepherd – I was really struck by the way that Jesus – in a loving and gentle way, of course – gave us the hard truth about life.

Biblical commentators have noted that this chapter of John’s Gospel has sometimes been interpreted in ways that harm people. There have been times it has been used an exclusivist, supersessionist text, all about who is “in” and who is “out” when it comes to God and God’s flock.

But in fact, this passage, at its heart, is not about scarcity at all. It’s not about the stinginess of God, and it’s not about the self-protective walls we like to build and hide behind. It’s about life. Life that pushes across formidable boundaries. Life that flourishes in precarious places. Life that never denies the real threat— and yet holds out the possibility of pasture, nourishment, protection, and rest.

There are certain things that we need to feel in our lives, and they include God’s constant presence, God’s constant grace and God’s constant love. We need to experience those things in both the good times and the tough times, in the joyful times and the tragic times.

And if we forget, we need to be reminded.

Because if we remind ourselves that God is with us, we will be more grounded, the chaos may seem much more manageable, and our hearts and souls might be opened to something spectacular. A soul boom if you will.

These are the things that we so desperately need. And even more than that, these are the things that we need to help others experience as well.

I think it is our responsibility to continue to share this parable. When Jesus spoke the words of this parable, the “shepherd leading the sheep” metaphor was relevant to the people that he was speaking to and a tangible way to tell the story of God’s constant presence and love. And now I think that it is our responsibility –as members of a faith community – to find relevant and real ways to tell our stories of God’s constant presence in our lives. We need to do what Jesus did through this parable and what Nadia did through her words on God’s presence, what Wilson is doing through his book, and share real stories about the ways the Spirit is constantly working in our lives.

Because these are the stories that people need to hear. Perhaps now more than ever. People need to be reminded that God is a constant in their lives. You need to be reminded. Even your minister needs to be reminded.

And so, we come together as a community of faith. We share our stories and allow ourselves to be vulnerable. We pray that God will open our hearts to what we need and create a space for the Holy Spirit to work within our midst. We remind ourselves that God is with us, and we live our lives as tangible expressions of that presence. We believe the words of Psalm 23, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me.” And then we tell the world – and we show the world! – that God is with us. Always.

Let us open our hearts and minds and perhaps we shall experience that Soul Boom of great healing transformation for ourselves, for our faith community, for all of creation.

May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Heather Power

With gratitude to the writings and wisdom of Nadia Bolz-Weber, Debie Thomas, and Rainn Wilson.