

Message for June 21, 2020

**This date was originally scheduled to be
Boston's 200th Anniversary Celebration**

Ezekiel 34:25-31

John 10:11-15

Two hundred years ago this month a minister was travelling through what was then called 'The Scotch Settlement', destined to become better known as 'The Scotch Block'. Founded only a year earlier in 1819, living conditions were very primitive. The people lived in what we would call glorified shacks. The roads were little more than muddy pot-holed tracks and of course there was the forest with its massive trees everywhere. The minister was the Rev. William Jenkins and he led a worship service in a clearing on the farm of Andrew Laidlaw. We don't know what that service was like though we are told that a tree stump served for a pulpit and that the people sat on logs. One other thing that we know about that service is that the sermon text was taken from the prophet Ezekiel.

“I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live in the wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety. I will make them and the places surrounding my hill a blessing. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. The trees will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land. They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid. I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations. Then they will know that I, the Lord their God am with them and that they, the Israelites, are my people, declares the Sovereign Lord. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord.”

These words were originally addressed to God's people 2600 years ago when they were in the midst of the Babylonian Exile. These were words of hope and promise. Yes, they acknowledge that life is hard and it

may appear that there is little or no hope for the future but take heart! I the Lord am with you! You are my flock and I am your shepherd! All will be well!

These were words of comfort and hope to God's people so long ago and it is certainly no surprise that the Rev. Jenkins chose this scripture passage for that very first sermon here 200 years ago. This was a message that those first settlers, trying to make a new life for themselves in a new land, desperately needed to hear. Imagine for a moment what their lives were like! They were literally surrounded by dangerous wild beasts. Starvation was always just one crop failure away. There was the incredibly hard work of clearing the land. Any injury or illness that we would now consider minor with our access to modern medicine and antibiotics could literally have been a death sentence back then.

Those who went before us here at Boston desperately needed to hear these words of hope; that they were God's flock and that God, the Good Shepherd, was with them. And the evidence that God was with them can be seen all around us today. Indeed I imagine that those who gathered here to worship on this very site so long ago would be utterly amazed to see us today. There are paved roads where there used to be muddy tracks, comfortable houses where their shacks once stood, and fields and wood lots in place of the forest. This very church building itself would have amazed them; a building, that with its distinctive Scottish architecture would have so powerfully reminded them of the Old Country. Yes, we live in a very different world than what they did but, as the old proverb puts it, "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

I cannot remember the author's name but a few years ago I read an article in which the writer said that we today are living in "the age of anxiety." He, or she, claimed that anxiety or fear is the predominant feeling for most people in the world today; in fact we fear and are anxious about so many different things. We fear the international situation; if a person in a powerful position of authority makes a bad judgement then, armed with nuclear weapons, the world as we know it would be destroyed. We have fears about the environment too; while no longer the lead story of the day,

global warming continues its relentless march and the pace is picking up. The weather and seasons seem to be so unpredictable and what will they be like in the years to come? There is fear too as globalization continues and countries can so easily find themselves at the mercy of other nations for what they need. All we have to do is think of the recent crisis when it appeared that we could not import enough desperately needed medical masks from China and then the American president threatened to block their export of masks to this country. And of course this article was written several years ago, long before the present pandemic.

During the past few months we have been living through what is, I hope and pray, a once in a life-time experience. Three short months ago life was so normal and then, everything seemed to change so quickly. And even now as life begins to return to some sense of normalcy, things aren't really normal and the fear and concern remains. Should we venture out? Should we wear masks when we do so? Should we get together with our families and friends? Even when worship resumes it won't be the way it used to be. Indeed fear and anxiety has carried over into the life of the church as well and not just because of the Covid-19 epidemic either.

During the last while I have been reading Andrew Root's book, "The Pastor in a Secular Age." The book makes for heavy but very thought-provoking reading. What Root does is trace the role of the pastor or minister down through the ages, showing how it has changed and evolved even as the church and society itself has changed and evolved. We are now of course living in what many people call the Post-Christian or Post-Christendom era. Neither the church nor the clergy command the same respect that they used to and this leaves us feeling anxious and even afraid. What is the role and ministry of the church and her ministers in a world where so many people feel that they have no need for either God or his church? For many people today God is an abstract concept and an irrelevant one at that. They have no real sense of God's presence or reality; he is not a part of their lives and they live their lives apart from him. And this too fills the church with anxiety and even fear.

Yes, we live in a very different world than God's people of 2600 years ago and those who gathered here to worship 200 years ago but even so, there are times when we like them may well feel that we are in the wilderness, surrounded by the wild animals waiting to devour us. What we must never ever forget though is that God's wonderful promise to the people in exile and to those settlers 200 years ago is still God's promise to us today. In the words of Ezekiel:

"You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture,
And I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord"

There are also the words of this morning's psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd", and today's New Testament lesson as well:

"I am the good shepherd.
I know my sheep and my sheep know me –
just as the Father knows me and I know the Father –
and I lay down my life for the sheep."

This is the good news and promise of the gospel. We may be like sheep, weak, defenseless and feeling at the mercy of forces beyond our control but even so, we have a shepherd. Indeed we have THE Shepherd, the one who lived, died and was raised for us; the one who even now is with us and praying for us. And it was this, the comforting, guiding presence of the Shepherd that brought the people out of exile so long ago and enabled them to rebuild their shattered lives. It was this, the comforting, guiding presence of the Shepherd with our ancestors in the faith here during the past 200 years that has made what we have here today possible. And it is this, the comforting, guiding presence of the Good Shepherd that will sustain us, not only today but also in all the days yet to come. Happy Birthday Boston!