

**Sermon: to fear no evil**  
**Marilyn Zehr**  
**Pastor: Toronto United Mennonite Church**  
**April 21 2013**

Focus Scripture Passages: Psalm 23, John 10:22-30

Tomorrow is Earth Day. It is the 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth day.

In 1970 the first one was celebrated in the United States in reaction to the way modern industrialization was polluting streams, lakes, land and air. And in 1970 there were almost 4 billion people who depended on the life support system we call Earth.

In 2013, there are 7 billion people who now depend on this life support system. Over the years we have become more aware of the ways our habits of living can and do impact this intricate system.

Scientists have tried to help us to understand what this looks like. Here is one possibility.

<http://thesolutionsjournal.anu.edu.au/node/935>

Pictures like this one, where it appears that our habits have already exceeded the earth's ability to support us have the potential to cause fear even though it is knowledge like this that is leading to creative solutions.

This past week, I watched two recently produced documentaries on the current status of our Earth. Both of these films were really well done, highly acclaimed and both in part portray hopeful ways forward.

However immersion in the "facts" as presented in these films followed

up by the reading I did actually functioned to increase my overall sense of anxiety about these matters.

The first one was called *Revolution* and was released last weekend in theatres. It is a beautifully produced film primarily about the earth's oceans. The images of the sea creatures from plankton to sea horses to whale sharks are breathtaking. As we watch these brilliantly coloured other-worldly graceful creatures move about in the water, we are also being informed of the dangers of ocean acidification and the profoundly serious consequences of over-fishing with facts and figures about loss of species and coral that are fairly well-known.

The second film was called *Mother: Caring for 7 Billion; why population growth still matters*. <http://www.motherthefilm.com/>

It is available for free streaming on the internet until the end of May. This film includes moving stories of how educating and empowering people, especially women in developing countries leads to an overall self-limiting of population growth.

As I said, both of these films included hopeful ways forward but they also left me feeling slightly empty and still fearful because what they didn't include was any reference to the role of faith or that there was anything larger at work here than human ingenuity and effort. These films assume that in order to be hopeful we need to believe that coordinated human effort will turn things around and/or help us find ways to adapt to the changes of our planet. Human ingenuity and effort

is important, of course, there's no question and it's already making important differences, but is it enough?

And what about the "fear" we might feel in the face of the facts?

Last weekend when our church youth took a walk on the Leslie street spit where the natural world is busy transforming human waste into a new and glorious habitat for migrating birds and other species, they (the youth) considered two questions. What were they grateful for and what did they fear. They have agreed that I may share with you that their fears are all environmentally related.

So let's talk about fear. Fear has always been part of our human make up and experience. Psalm 23 is one of the most popular Psalms for good reason. It directly addresses human fear. The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need....."Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

The passage in John for today is also about fear.

In this case it is about fear that leads to anger and anger that almost leads to violence. After the feast of Dedication Jesus strolls along the portico of Solomon and the Jewish leaders ask him to stop messing around with them and tell them if he really is the Messiah or not. Jesus' responds, "Everything that I've done so far tells you who I am, but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them life and no one

will snatch them away from me or away from the Father, because I and the Father are one.” And the Jewish leaders at the time who asked him this question become enraged, pick up stones to stone him – saying it’s not because of what he has done but because he makes himself one with the Father and therefore makes himself God, this is why they want to stone him. But in this particular case Jesus escapes their wrath – only to lay down his life for the sheep a little while later.

In this passage – who was afraid? Everyone except Jesus is afraid in this passage.

Those whom Jesus protects like sheep are afraid (sheep are notoriously anxious creatures) and those whose fear and distrust about Jesus’ identity leads them to anger because Jesus essentially says that if they do not listen to him or follow him then they are outside the fold.

Taking a closer look at fear for a moment:

We know that intense fear begins with paralysis and because of the work of our limbic system or reptilian brains can quickly equip us to move on to a possible flight or fight response.

In the face of our Earth’s current environmental challenges we humans respond in all three ways, paralysis, fight or flight.

If we get past denial, the overwhelming enormity of the challenges can lead to a nebulous sense of anxiety that has no immediate target for either of the flight or fight response. As a result we may feel paralyzed.

If our anxiety becomes acute, we could if we wish channel our flight response into escapist behaviours like building survival shelters or space ships – places with artificial atmospheres and extensive food and water supplies. That way, if the worst we can imagine happens we'll be able to take care of ourselves at least for a while anyway.

Secondarily if our anxiety is acute, we could if we wish channel our fight response into building up our armaments and defense weapons so that we'll be prepared to fend off the rest of the world when we are among the few nations with access to fresh water, arable land and oil resources. In fact this chart, shows that our current federal government is already doing that....

note the difference in spending on environmental issues vs. military spending in the following petition.

<http://vowpeace.org/our-work/petition-reduce-military-spending/>

But our scriptures about the shepherd in the Psalm and in John point to another way - a way through the fear to life – a way through the valley of the shadow of death if you will.

My own immersion in anxiety this week as I considered environmental issues and challenges highlighted for me the vital nature of following the shepherd. This is the something larger that is missing from the documentaries - the voice and compassionate concern of the shepherd for the sheep. This voice and compassion reduces their anxiety, creates security, and by so doing brings life to the sheep. Whereas anxiety and its fruit slowly cause one to waste away, compassion and its fruit bring

life. In order to stay connected to the life that the shepherd brings we need to do whatever we can to listen to and follow the shepherd – daily. And when we hear and follow we will find ourselves in solidarity with others who are doing the same.

Those who are listening to and following the voice of the shepherd are those who like the shepherd are empowered to live compassionate lives instead of fearful ones.

Those who are listening to and following the voice of the shepherd are those who recognize that the path to world security in the face of environmental challenges is living by a new set of rules. Instead of living by the rules of scarcity, hoarding and military defense of the world's precious resources, these people espouse and live a version of radical sharing of the world's resources.

And this movement of radical sharing is coming to a neighbourhood near you. There are currently neighbourhoods in Toronto that compile a database of the things they own that they are willing to share. One miter or table saw per 20 households might be enough. What about power drills and garden rakes and hoes and lawn mowers (let's just get rid of the lawn mowers and plant something other than grass, shall we) What about car sharing? What about room/house or condo sharing or renting globally through websites like airbnb?

The earth cannot provide our current North American lifestyle for 7 billion people – so who has to change? We do, and though there are

powerful and important environmental reasons why to change - it seems like a good time to point out that once basic needs for security, food, shelter and education are met people with fewer material goods and choices are generally happier.

Those who are listening to and following the voice of the shepherd are also those who radically respect and work with the earth's ability to renew itself – planting trees and food producing gardens.

They are those who campaign to stop raping the earth even if that rapacious attitude created 10,000 jobs. A sustainable livelihood for 1000's of people can be created in more and different ways than exploiting the land for its resources and making the people who used to live on it into mining labourers.

Those who are listening to and following the voice of the shepherd are those who feel called to defend the earth and help all of us to create new relationships with each other and the earth of which we are a part. Many of these people are indigenous and more and more of them make up the Idle No More movement or have become allies of this movement. Idle No More promotes respectful and renewed relationships among the earth's people and with the earth itself. A member of our congregation - Diem Lafortune has said that the foundation of Idle No More and the concerns of Indigenous people are founded on two very basic principles – “sharing and living in a balanced equitable relationship with mother earth and each other.” When this movement lives and moves from a

compassionate self-giving centre – they are also following the voice of the shepherd.

Unlike real sheep when we as people follow the shepherd we become more and more like the shepherd.

Remember the conversation that Peter had with a resurrected Jesus.

Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?

Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.

Feed my lambs.

Simon son of John, do you love me?

Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.

Tend my sheep.

Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.

Feed my sheep.

Jesus concluded this conversation by saying to Peter, “follow me.”

Peter’s call to likewise be a shepherd did not negate the necessity of following Jesus.

Occasionally pastors will refer to their congregations as flocks and the pastor is metaphorically considered the shepherd. When this metaphor arose once at a pastor’s gathering, and someone asked me how my flock was doing, I responded with, “Well, I don’t really have a flock of sheep. There are so many strong lay leaders at TUMC that they’re actually a flock of shepherds.”



And so - flock of shepherds – if you love, listen to and follow the shepherd, you will find ways to feed and tend the sheep. As we move together through the valley of the shadow of death we will be in a position to fear no evil. Living instead in the light of the compassionate shepherd – the one who went so far as to lay down his life for the sheep provides a sense of security that can and must be shared. Those green pastures and still waters and the table of wine and oil and goodness and mercy of Psalm 23 are emblematic of the life that the shepherd makes available for all of us – all 7 Billion of us.

I will let this picture taken by Astronauts of Apollo 8 from the surface of the Moon in 1968 - called Earthrise - have the last word.

<http://apod.nasa.gov/apod/ap051224.html>