



From the Pulpit: May 8, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Eastertide—Congregational Care and Mother's Day

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

John 10:22–30

A Collective Murmuration, III: Murmuration of Love

Christine Hides and I are in the middle of an Easter sermon series called “A Collective Murmuration,” drawing on the metaphor Julie Danilek and Mignon Dupepe used for this year’s Outreach Benefit: A Murmuration of Hope. Today’s sermon, A Murmuration of Love, extends that theme.

The stunning sunset photos of migrating starlings in flight remind us that it is only through collective, communal action that we navigate the path ahead; it is only when we listen to one another that we find our way. Their unity (the starlings’) and ours is critical for survival.

It seems apropos on Mothers’ Day that in the 12 days it takes starling chicks to hatch, scientists tell us that it is both the male and female who share incubation duties, a very twenty first century arrangement.

This is no mother who is put upon, walked over, taken advantage of.

This is a mother and father harnessed together, submerged in the task, first the shared nest, then the work of feeding insects to the hatchlings (who are fed on average every 14 minutes, no wonder it takes two). It then takes another 20 days for the hatchlings to leave the nest, join the flock and be raised up into flight, finally letting their wings whisper within the collective murmuration.

May we mimic the mutuality of the starlings, their commitment to each other as they find the common rhythms of shared life together.

When Mother’s Day is on a Sunday (which it always is), it becomes for me, a time to remember God as *Multilingual Mother, bending near to hear our whisper, our cry.* More on that in a moment.

“Only now—and
now only tentatively,
precautionary—can
the whisper begin
to repopulate our
common shared lives.”

In our scripture lesson for today, you will hear the language of “Father,” one of the intimate ways that Jesus refers to the divine. In Aramaic, Jesus calls God *abba*, akin to papa or even daddy—the way only a child would refer to their parent. Some of us use that intimate parent language even with aging parents: to the last they remain Mama, Papa, no other word captures our heart for them, a precognitive connection to the ones who loved us first

even before we had words to describe such love. This is how I understand God on Mother’s Day, the one who loved us first, the one for whom we have been longing even before we had words to think or describe such longing and love. So as you hear The Gospel of John, listen for the longings of your heart as God rises up to you.

John 10 (adapted from The Message and CEB)

They were celebrating Hanukkah just then in Jerusalem. It was winter. Jesus was strolling in the Temple across [the place called] Solomon's Porch. The Jewish Opposition, circling him, said, "How long are you going to keep us guessing? If you're the Christ, tell us straight out."

Jesus answered, "I told you, but you don't believe. Everything I have done has been authorized by my Father, actions that speak louder than words. You don't believe because you're not my sheep. My sheep recognize my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them real and eternal life. No one can steal them from out of my hand. The Father who put them under my care is greater than all. No one could ever get them away from my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

In a book published last year, John Green writes that it has been a long while since someone outside his household has whispered in his ear. In early March 2020, before the unthinkable became commonplace, he was about to go on stage for a speaking event when his colleague leaned in and whispered to him...something...maybe a reminder to turn on his mic?...the content of the whisper matters less than the act itself. Only now—and now only tentatively, precautionary—can the whisper begin to repopulate our common shared lives.

Do you whisper? Probably not over zoom, probably not over face time or conference call, probably not too often if you live alone. Even in a household of two, a whisper seems unnecessary.

John Green goes on to say that he was at home one day with his young daughter, just the two of them, and as he was trying to hurry up the breakfast routine before shoes-on and out-the-door to daycare, she insisted on whispering. "Daddy, can I tell you a secret?" Only a person in a hurry can feel the bone deep desire to say "no" to such a request, only to realize that, of course yes the three year old needs you to please slow down enough to listen to her whispered secret.

"In this image of the Good Shepherd, we see the motherhood of God, God bending to hear our whisper, ...in such a way as to hear—really hear—the trepidations, the fears, the secrets of our lives."

What she said, he would not tell—it was a secret of course—but what he noticed was that she instinctively knew that it had to be told up close, close enough for the hairs on your ear to tickle, close enough that no sound need draw across vocal cord, only air.

"Whispers are definitionally intimate," John Green says, "All talking is made of breath, but when someone whispers you are hearing [only] the breath."¹

This is all I can think of now. Whispers. When Jesus says, "My sheep recognize my voice" I think *whispers*. I can no longer think of the Big-Booming-Don-LaFontaine-Samuel-L-Jackson-Morgan-Freeman-Voice.

I am thinking *whisper*, breath-becoming-word, the-invisible-now-spoken.

We whisper our vulnerabilities. We whisper our most fragile requests and our most furtive confessions. And it is the whisper-reply of God, the breath of God, the deep inhalation of the divine in which we begin to know and feel the kind of safekeeping and protection of our Good-Shepherd-God.

¹ Anthropocene Reviewed, John Green, 2021.

In this image of the Good Shepherd, we see the motherhood of God, God bending to hear our whisper, God pausing amid the rush of life to be alongside us in such a way as to hear—really hear—the trepidations, the fears, the secrets of our lives.

This is the intimacy of God. This is the nearness of Christ. When it is only the big booming voice of God, something impersonal arises. When we come close, close enough to whisper—close enough for God’s metaphorical hairs on God’s metaphorical ears to metaphorically tickle—we see in a new way the Good Shepherd whose voice is familiar, whose voice is known.

On Mother’s Day, we learn again that God is a Multilingual Mother, bending near to hear our whisper, our cry.

Let us not forget Multilingual. French-Caribbean philosopher Edouard Glissant says that “relation is spoken multilingually.”² In other words, there is freedom in a multilingual God (and therefore oppression or totalitarianism in a monolingual God).

To be heard is to be understood. To hear is to understand. If Jesus says, “My sheep recognize my voice,” then we must know that the voice of Christ can be heard across the multiplicity of languages, the multiplicity of cognition, the multiplicity of our very being. The neurodivergent, the neuroatypical, those beyond language, those whose forgetting has forged an impasse between her and I... there God still hears and is heard.

A multilingual God too, can understand our whisper, and when drawing near to a multilingual God each and all can understand and recognize the voice of Christ. This is more radical maybe, than we want to admit. It is certainly more Kenilworth Union too. We are a congregation with these diverse windows that speak to the multiplicity of God, the hundreds of hundreds of ways by which God has spoken to the people, and therefore the abundant ways in which God has spoken

to each of us across the centuries, the generations. God has spoken in Arabic, Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Dutch, German, Mandarin, Pashto, Dari, Ukrainian and Russian, and in every endangered and extinct language ever spoken: Bolo in Angola, Kua in Botswana, Maslam in Cameroon.

When Jesus says, “My sheep recognize my voice,” Jesus is saying that God’s mother tongue is love, that God’s mother tongue is your voice, your whispered word, your barely audible groan, and the translation of divine love is available for each of us, with the freedom to choose how we welcome and allow that love to transform us.

There is no one way to know and understand God. Instead Jesus forges the way with us, the way for us, the way with each of us beloved. Every person in the wide expansive of the sacred flock can hear in her own mother tongue the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

Jesus says, “My sheep recognize my voice,” and in that way, Jesus is opening us to the multilingual invitation into love. May the murmurations of your heart be heard by this Good Shepherd God and may the whisper of God be heard within you today. Amen.

*“...God’s mother
tongue is love,
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² Poetics of Relation, Edouard Glissant, 1990.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Christine V. Hides

God of Grandeur, how majestic is your name through the earth; your glory higher than heaven (Psalm 8).
The greening world around us a “translation of life’s tenacity” into grace.
The “perfect contrast” of sky and ridgerock a wordless testament to your peace.
The “bisecting arcs and pitches” of migrating birds a dance of divine joy.

You give us this moment and the next and the next,
“Voids which we are free to fill,”
these “singularly glorious gifts.”

And so we fill each moment, searching for glimpses of grandeur in the grit of everyday life:
The beautiful bouquet delivered to a recovering neighbor,
The scent of clean-snapped sheets as we care for the ones we love,
A friendly hand extended as we lug our laptops to work,
The warm embrace of a knitted blanket as we settle in to binge the next show,
The poem or prayer that arrives in our grief
The experience of giving and receiving mothering love, that tender, self-giving care among the deepest yearnings of our heart.

For these among “10,000 definitions of the divine” and more, the infinite moments of grandeur that grace the gritty, everyday moments, we are truly grateful.
You care for your people; you pay attention to our humanity. Every moment you meet us; Christ’s abiding love is present with us in our homes, our communities, and in the care extended from this congregation. And so we trust you with the closest cares and concerns of our hearts:

We ask your blessing upon those for whom this day is joyful and for those for whom this day is tender beyond words; and for those members named and unnamed who weave a wonderful web of congregational care.

We ask for your healing and strength for those who are ill, facing surgery, awaiting diagnosis, and recovering; and for those who await reconciliation with loved ones.

We ask for your peace, especially for the Ukraine, for an end to war, and for all those displaced to find safe haven until they may return home. And we ask that your deepest peace and wisdom be upon all those you have entrusted to care for your creation, for the skies and oceans, for the sandpiper and the salamander, the wild animals, whales and creatures of the deep, and every living thing, that life might continue to thrive on this planet for generations to come.

Holy God of grace and grandeur, you are our Easter hope, our Lord and our light, our shepherd and savior. With the company of heaven and earth we praise your holy name and entrust our lives to you, through Jesus Christ who teaches us to pray...Our Father...Amen.

End Note

Quotes are from the poem, “The Greatest Grandeur” by Pattiann Rogers

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