

*What We Will Be Has Not Yet Been Revealed*

*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*

*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*

*April 30, 2023 Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd and Earth Day Sundays*

*Psalms 23; from I John 3:1-3, 14-19a; from John 10:1-16*

**Welcome:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday and Earth Day Sunday. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online. We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. Our congregation has voted to establish a reparations fund for the hardships they have had to endure from colonial times unto this day. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom.

The word pastor comes from a Latin root meaning shepherd. Jesus calls us to shepherd one another, so we are all pastors, we are all called to offer pastoral care to one another and to lay down our life out of love for one another. Pastoring is crucial to the well-being of the whole flock. So please linger after the service again today to do this good shepherding, extending your care and support especially to those you do not know well and those you know are struggling so that every person here feels safe and at home within our fold.

**Call to Worship:** During Easter Season we celebrate passing from the darkness of death into the brilliant light of new life. The fourth Sunday of every Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday because shepherding leads from death to life, and not just for the sheep. As the Dalai Lama says, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

The secret to the greatest vitality we can have, the power of eternal life flowing through us, is to give our lives in service for the love of others and the love of God. We know this is true by looking at those among us who inspire us with their loving and serving. They continue to be a living presence long after they are gone, whether it be a nurturing leader like Nelson Mandela, or one of our parents or grandparents or a saint of this congregation.

Let us worship together the Good Shepherding Spirit that we see in Christ and in one another. Let us worship in grateful wonder and awe.

**Children’s Time**— The first Earth Day was in 1970 when I was a freshman in high school. Our church organized us to go out and do what we now do on Green Up Day. People had made a mess of the earth and we went out to clean it up.

My crew walked along a river that people had polluted. I had never walked there, and even more than being distressed by all the garbage, I was moved by its beauty.

These have always been a part of Earth Day—to see what a mess we have made and organize to clean it up, and also to see the beauty of the earth and love it. We as a church are still keeping that faith—the faith that we can make a difference. To paraphrase our former neighbor, Bill Coffin, we need to keep the faith despite the evidence, because keeping the faith is the one way we can change the evidence. Acting in hope when things seem hopeless is our only chance to fulfill our hope. And that faith, and that hope, are grounded and made powerful by love. “Faith, hope and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.”

So I invite you now to make a list of things you love in nature—and of course people are part of nature, so what are some of the things you love here on earth...?

Because we love such things, we hope for their wellbeing, and because we love and hope, we keep faith with them by *working* for their wellbeing.

But it’s not easy. We are up against massive destructive forces, so we need the help of our higher good shepherd to guide and empower us to do more than we can imagine is possible.

There is something we can do that connects us to the spirit in nature and in us that can help us find our way...Pray! Prayer opens our hearts to be led. So let us pray together the Lord’s Prayer...

### ***What We Will Be Has Not Yet Been Revealed***

The star we call the sun formed about four and a half billion years ago, and Earth not long after that. Our species, Homo sapiens, has been around for only about three hundred thousand years out of those four billion, just a tiny fraction of earth’s history, and it’s only in the past ten thousand years that modern humanity has evolved.

Think about it in that perspective—four billion years on earth went by with no humans, then two hundred and ninety thousand years went by with primitive humans, and then all of a sudden in the last ten thousand years humans began writing, farming, building cities, creating

laws, learning how to fly and travel under the ocean and go to the moon and talk to people instantly who were on the other side of the earth and build computerized brains that can do calculations far more rapidly than we can. We have come to understand the subatomic structure of the universe, and we have built telescopes that can see back almost to the very beginning of the universe, thirteen billion lightyears away.

Humanity suddenly gave rise to sophisticated philosophy, religion and the arts only twenty-five hundred years ago, and then to the age of reason and science four hundred years ago, and then the age of liberation and pluralism fifty years ago, and now we may be on the verge of a new consciousness and relationship to the earth.

All this in just a ten thousand year blink of the earth's eye.

It is a tragic mistake to think that this progress is a sign of how great humans are. For one thing, foolish things humanity is doing right now could destroy all life on earth in any one of several technological ways.

And for another thing, we did not accomplish our evolution by ourselves, any more than the first living cell created its own life or the first reptile created its own ability to crawl out onto dry land. The creator of all things, the force of life, the good shepherd Spirit flowing through the earth—that is who or what enabled our evolution, and if we do not wise up and become aligned to the ways of that Spirit, it will have to work for hundreds of thousands of years more to restore the planet we destroyed.

We call ourselves homo sapiens, which means wise human. We also have called ourselves children of God, as we heard in today's passage in I John. We still need to earn the title sapiens, but it is a given that we are the children or manifestations of the force that formed the sun and earth and created life, the Spirit that we name God. If we humbly and truly understand who we are, we gain the wisdom to treat all creatures and all creation as one with us and as holy, and that is the most important wisdom we need in order to survive.

Are we done evolving? That is the key question. I John says, "What we will be has not yet been revealed." The sun has a life expectancy of another four or five billion years. It is conceivable that humans could live on earth that long. If so, think of our infancy now—only three hundred thousand years into an evolution that could last four billion more.

Imagine how mature and wise humans could become if we survive. We have the potential to develop the heart and mind of Christ, to become a pure pane of glass through which the light of the Spirit within us shines. That is our hope, and the hope of the earth.

How can we overcome all odds to make this evolutionary leap? The scriptures are absolutely clear: love is the way, learning to love like a good shepherd that lays down its life for any sheep of any flock, for all people and all the earth.

The Spirit that created all things has evolved a complex consciousness for the earth and we happen to be the lucky species carrying it. What we see in Jesus is the highest and purest evolution of this consciousness in human form. Christ-like love sees a part of God's creation that is hurting or in need and it responds. That has to be what the Spirit is hoping all humanity will do—spend the next few billion years living as a conscious force of love, as good shepherds on the Spirit's behalf of this amazing, beautiful, abundant creation.

What we are now may not be so good, but what we will be has not yet been revealed, and much in our spiritual tradition and human history encourages us to hope. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm leaves no grounds for despair, and people who have achieved great moral maturity and spiritual depth show what we may become.

Nelson Mandela was interested only in his material wellbeing as a young man, but then awoke to compassion as his people struggled to become free. At first he wanted nothing to do with white oppressors, but he awoke further to a pluralistic view, seeing that South Africa should be the nation of all who called it home.

Then Mandela went to prison, and, as Bishop Tutu observed, Mandela had another awakening there beyond mere pluralism to a magnanimous universal Christ-like love that enabled him to find a way to bring together the most polarized, hostile opponents and help them live as one.

Where Mandela went toward Christ's good shepherd consciousness, we can go, too.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is read mostly at funerals, but if we read it through a lens of indigenous wisdom, like *Braiding Sweetgrass*, or through a lens of Taoism, we see it is really a path for the flourishing of humanity and the earth.

Follow the Great Spirit, the Tao, the Good Shepherd, and it will lead to a green earth and peaceful waters, to people in harmony with land and other creatures, to abundant food and drink for all, to sufficiency as a birthright.

The sacred way, the path of rightness, the flow of the Spirit gives birth and passes through the valley of the shadow of death to new life. It is a force of restoration, a force of love, guiding and protecting us, anointing us to be like overflowing cups of its love and light. The Spirit flowing through us builds a house, a realm, a beloved community where goodness and mercy are extended to all, every sheep, every flock, with no one left out.

Will we fulfill this holy wisdom, or will we fail to meet the urgent demand of the next few years and become extinct? What we will be has yet to be revealed, but every good shepherding act, every person who turns to the Spirit and follows its path of self-giving love is making it possible that we may turn humanity around and have another ten thousand or three billion years to live as the good shepherds of the earth. Imagine what we could be...

Let us pray together in silence.

**Haiku by Herbert A. Goertz:**

What promise they hold  
The tight buds just emerging—  
Summer dwells in them