

## A Godly Woman

Today we are gathered to celebrate Marilyn’s ministry among us. I want to offer a brief meditation comparing Marilyn’s gifts with the characteristics of some women in the Bible. But let me begin by telling you about the other scripture choices for today’s service.

The John 15 passage about the vine and the branches was the theme of Marilyn’s ordination service in 2009. It’s no coincidence that it is an image taken from nature. The commitment to stay connected to Christ, the vine, her source of life and wisdom, is the truest thing I know about Marilyn and of her faith journey. And the spiritual gifts with which she has ministered to all of us come from her deep connection with the Divine.

Psalm 23 is close to Marilyn’s heart for some personal reasons. It is also the psalm from which we draw images about shepherding and leading. For those who may not know, the word pastor is another word for shepherd. Sheep-herder.

Shepherd is a common image used for leaders in the Hebrew Scriptures. Shepherd is one of the biblical images we have for God.

In one of Marilyn’s first sermons she talked about this image and used Isaiah 40 as a reference. It says the following about God:

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

In that sermon Marilyn brought several different pictures of shepherds and put them at the front. She wanted to change our perception of what sheep herders looks like and what they do, especially the easy notion that they are always men. I remember especially this striking painting of a shepherdess. (William Adolph Bouguereau, *Young Shepherdess* – see link below<sup>1</sup>)

In that sermon Marilyn cautioned us (I quote):

“Now, the image of the shepherd can be complex. Real life shepherds are not like pictures of little Bo Peep with a nice dress and parasol from the famous nursery rhyme.

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The real men and women who care for sheep are bronzed, brawny and strong. It can be hard, hot and dirty work – shearing the sheep, protecting them, being available to help when they are lambing.”

Of the picture, she said “[it is] a little bit less romanticized. Check out her forearms – I don’t think you’d want to get in her way!” We may not know how prophetic all those words were about us and about Marilyn, but a lot of it rang true as I thought of your ministry.

I think that in her time with us as a pastor Marilyn has lived up to that image of great strength, great caring and great courage for the hard work involved in leading a congregation. We are not an easy flock and I’m sure that she has developed some spiritual and emotional muscles while caring for us!

She has borne the burden and the joys of walking closely with us as we seek out spiritual nourishment, try to avoid dangers and as we go about our business of living and dying, giving birth and especially as we navigated implementing our church’s vision for being a place of God in this city. She has brought us to graze in some new and unfamiliar pastures as well.

In Genesis there is the story of Rachel (whose name means Ewe), who herded her father’s sheep. It was unusual for a woman to be shepherdess even in Bible times, she was a strong and capable woman. **So Marilyn, I see you as Rachel the shepherdess.**

Marilyn came to TUMC as our first female lead pastor. She came with training as a spiritual director and in her time here she also quietly earned her Master of Theology in Spiritual Direction through the Toronto School of Theology. Her thesis was about applying the principles of spiritual direction in the context of congregations. “Spiritual direction is the practice of being with people as they attempt to deepen their relationship with the divine, or to learn and grow in their own personal spirituality.” It is listening to people’s sacred stories. In her time here she listened to, named and honoured our sacred stories of growing, grieving, losing and finding the Divine.

This requires the gifts of a leader who is a listener and a companion, a non-anxious presence who is connected to the movement of the Spirit. Marilyn modeled these gifts for us and invited us to listen for God’s Spirit at work in our midst, as people of God and as followers of Jesus.

In the book of Judges there is the story of the prophet Deborah, called a “mother in Israel.” Deborah is one of the major judges in the Bible (meaning a leader, not judge in the juridical sense). She used to sit under a palm tree and people would come to her to seek wisdom and perhaps to settle disputes, or to hear a word from God.

Again, these were roles that were most often associated with men, but lo and behold there she is in Judges 4. We don't know how Deborah got to that position, only what she did in that particular situation. (Now there are other parts of this story that are uncomfortable for our contemporary theological sensitivities, but for the sake of her being a metaphorical model of leadership, here's what happens.) Deborah relays God's military orders to a general named Barak and he is scared to take on the enemy, general Sisera, who has been winning most of the battles so far. In an unusual move for a general he tells Deborah that he'll only go into battle if she goes too. So she agrees to go and, of course, they win the battle.

**So Marilyn, as a leader who would walk with us in our fears and in our battles, and face dangers with us, I see you as the prophet Deborah.**

One of the many that gifts Marilyn has brought to our congregation is a fuller theological understanding of the Divine Feminine and all that this perspective implies for how we relate to God. It's huge. It's not simply a matter of changing the pronouns we use for God from male to female, it's about how imagining God who gives birth, tends, and works within cycles begins to break down systems where people dominate each other and dominate the Earth. It's a whole new way of thinking theologically. Marilyn's passion for creation and her relationship with the Earth emerge from this place of deep theological reflection and a willingness to see Nature also as God's revelation and to see us as part of that. Through her hard work of studying and reading and struggling to bring us well-grounded sermons she has educated us and challenged us to see God in a different way. She has given birth to new ways of understanding God.

**So Marilyn, I see you as Mary and Elizabeth, who became pregnant and gave birth to something, someone, who would change the world.**

I think it is important to name that this last year has been a year of some disruption in our relationship with Marilyn as our pastor. The intersection of Marilyn's powerful sacred story of coming out and our own perceptions and experiences was sometimes joyful and sometimes painful. We got through it by journeying together and by seeking God's leading along the way. And now Marilyn is seeing a path ahead that takes her away from us as a pastor and she is expanding her vocation, her call, to include overt care for the Earth.

In the story of God's people in Genesis, there come a couple of times where Sarah and her servant Hagar are in conflict. Both times, Hagar goes into the wilderness, and both times God finds her there and speaks to her and promises her that she will become a great nation. Hagar responds by giving a name to God, she calls God "*El-roi*", which means "the one who sees me." She knew that God saw her in that place. **Marilyn, I see in you Hagar, whom God saw and promised to bless out there in the wild.**

I refer again to the passage in John 15. Marilyn's leaving us as our pastor feels like both Marilyn and we are losing a part of who we have been as a church. But, based on this passage I'd like to think of it like we're being pruned, the image is meant to comfort us: "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear *more* fruit." This is our hope and consolation as we change the nature of our relationship.

As we move forward, for both Marilyn and us to bear fruit we must continue to be rooted in Christ, our life-source who urges us: "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

Marilyn, I see in you a godly woman, rooted in Christ, may you continue to bear much fruit.