

4 Lent Psalm 23
Christ and Grace March 22, 2020
Robin Teasley

Psalm 23 King James Version

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; *
 I shall not want.
- 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; *
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.
- 3 He restoreth my soul; *
 he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake.
- 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; *
 for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
- 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; *
 thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *
 and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Sometimes I am reminded that God knows what we need and puts it before us exactly when we need it. If there has ever been a time when I needed something, lots of things actually, it's now. We had a hint it was coming but oh what a week it has been. I imagine all of you are feeling much the same. Along with the stress and challenges, I have seen and heard some amazing things this week and what I have noticed is that they have appeared before me like manna. This holy food from God appears like a table prepared before me, like oil for anointing and healing, like a cup that runneth over. When it happens it's all goodness and mercy and I know I am dwelling in the house of the Lord even when our church is closed.

Right now it feels a lot like the valley of the shadow of death, as the COVID-19 coronavirus spreads around the world and now even into our neighborhoods. I have had to really look for the green pastures, the still waters, the table of God.

This is difficult when I am afraid and when I am anxious; when I am angry that people are refusing to take this pandemic seriously; when there are no groceries on the shelves and when people working in restaurants cannot make enough money now to pay rent.

There are things being lost, too. Jobs, investments, vacation plans, and end of school year events – especially for high school and college seniors. Those who are blessed to keep working at home have had to reinvent wheels, change gears, and work under challenging conditions. If we have

children, they are home with us too and, whether we are parents or grandparents, many of us have suddenly become homeschool teachers. We cannot visit with our elderly loved ones, and celebrations like birthdays, graduations, weddings, even funerals are on hold. Has there ever been a Lent like this? Not in our lifetimes. And I need to break the news to you that we will not be in church for Palm Sunday, Holy Week, or Easter. It's a lot to take in, isn't it? But friends, even in all of this loss and in the grief that inevitably comes with it, there is a path of righteousness, there is grace in green pastures, there is a table prepared for us.

You see, I believe the lectionary readings come to us in God's time and I believe we have the 23rd Psalm today for a reason. We know and love this psalm so well that perhaps it's too familiar to us. In church we read the version in the Book of Common Prayer, but most of us have the King James Version memorized. And yet for all its familiarity, there may be some things in this psalm that we have missed, some beautiful insights that can deepen our understanding of God's promise to be with us in all things.

In the original Hebrew translation of this psalm, there are exactly twenty-six words before and after the words "thou art with me". Hebrew poets did this sort of thing intentionally all the time – many of the psalms are like acrostics, set out in particular and recognizable patterns to emphasize important things. So, for the psalmist who wrote this psalm, the most important thing to remember, to know, is that **God is with us**. Emmanuel. God is with us in every part of our lives, no matter what might be happening around us. God is with us in the events we are experiencing now.

There is another insight at this point in the psalm, "thou art with me", where the writer changes the tense from third person to second person. Though the writer begins by talking *about* God saying, "The Lord is my shepherd... he leadeth me... he restoreth my soul," in verse four the psalmist shifts to second person saying, "for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me... thou preparest a table..." Instead of talking *about* God, the psalmist begins talking *to* God. We can see the psalmist's faith increase through this dialogue, we see the relationship with God deepen into complete trust, we see that God the Shepherd provides all that is needed in every moment.

I know that, at least for me, it's been all too easy to assume I will have not only what I need but also what I want, and I can reluctantly admit that I have not given enough thought to the ways my wants might affect someone else's needs. And there is nothing like an empty shelf where the toilet paper and ground beef and chicken are supposed to be to remind me of that.

As much as we may love the 23rd Psalm, as many times as we've read it and delighted in it and been comforted by it, now we are in a time and place to truly apply it to our lives. We've grown used to our consumer culture, used to making our own needs a priority, used to doing what we want to do when we want to do it. Perhaps we have become lost sheep with regard to the things in this life that are most important. Important things like family, celebrating life events, time spent with friends, a job that puts food on the table, Sabbath time to spend in God's word, and receiving communion each week at church.

So, getting back to that holy food that God has provided for me this week, here are some morsels of mercy and grace I have received. I have had conversations and email exchanges and texts with many of you who tell me you are just fine and are willing to help others whom I might know have needs. Meals have been served at the Hope Center – once by a great group of volunteers before the quarantine, and again this past Thursday by a smaller group working a safe distance apart. They were able to do this with resources provided by your generous pledges, and by the generosity of the owner of the Subway in Colonial Heights.

We continue to host the AA meeting each week as it's a small group with great commitment to the work of recovery. Families from the neighborhood are playing softball in our lower parking lot. The Vestry has been reaching out to every member to see how we are doing – if you have not yet heard from them, be patient, your call is coming. Deliveries of toilet paper, treats, and groceries by some of our parishioners to our shut ins have warmed hearts and brightened the lonely days.

Look around and see the beauty of creation bursting in color and new life – another tangible sign of God's presence. Families are out in the neighborhood, walking, riding bikes, keeping a six-foot distance but greeting one another with smiles and waves in passing. The community is visiting our labyrinth after a Facebook post was seen by over 2200 viewers. We have this treasure of a perfect spot for some social distance worshiping and prayer.

Reading the 23rd Psalm in the midst of great uncertainty opens us to the goodness and mercy of the Good Shepherd in ways we haven't experienced before. It opens our hearts to see the abundance of God's provision all around us. It reminds us that **God is with us** in every situation, leading us to green pastures and still waters and tables prepared for us. In the weeks to come, I encourage you to read the scripture and feast on God's word; let it feed you until we can again gather around the table for Holy Communion. And when that day comes, the table prepared for us will be overflowing with love. Amen.