

+Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ!

What strange times we are now living in. Normally, on this day we would be together at Our Savior, the HOPE on the Hill, greeting one another, worshiping, singing, and sharing the sacrament of communion. I would be able to look out and see your faces which often provides me the strength to preach the words that I have prepared. But for the time being we connect and communicate through websites, Facebook, phone calls and emails, hoping and praying that we can lessen the sickness and loss of life that health organizations warns COVID-19 could cause. Unfortunately, our brothers and sisters in many areas around the world have not escaped the rapid spread of this sickness and too many have already lost their earthly lives. For all those battling the sickness, for those caring for the sick and for those that have lost loved ones to this illness, along with everyone that is dealing with self-isolation, separation from their normal lives having to forego school, work and social relationships, we pray to God for His comfort and healing in this uncertain time.

Our Sunday focus during Lent this year has been the Psalms, using them in our liturgy and for the basis of our preaching. I have the good luck, or the hefty challenge, of preaching on Psalm 23. That psalm ranks up with John 3:16 in its familiarity, which is where the challenge comes in. Has this psalm become too well known, heard too much that its true worth is lost in its overexposure?

We have heard Psalm 23 on hundreds of occasions; funerals and memorial services, on Good Shepherd Sunday and in Sunday School. Its words are used in the theme song for one of our favorite British TV comedies, Vicar of Dibley. (there is a YouTube link to a performance of this song included on the OSLC website and linked in the bulletin as the offertory.)

In my ministry as a SAM, I've read this psalm aloud during pastoral visits; a number of times to people who are in their final stages of this earthly life. I spoke these words the night I sat

in the hospice room with my mother during her final hours. This psalm, these words, though so very familiar, still hold tremendous comfort, reassurance, hope that God is not far away. Our loving God is right here with us. Here in this stressful time in our lives, God has not and will never abandon us. And these words are exactly what we need during this uncertain, worrisome, frightening period in our lives.

I want to share a version of Psalm 23 interpreted by Dr. Ralph W. Klein, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. I have added some comments between the sections of his interpretation:

Confessional Statement

Yahweh is my shepherd; I lack nothing! (1)

Yahweh makes me lie down in grassy pastures;

--leads me alongside restful waters; (2)

--brings me back to wholeness;

--guides me in safe tracks [or obedient paths];

--in order to maintain the reputation of the name Yahweh. (3)

This first section talks of the wondrous provisions from God, Our Shepherd, the one who cares for us at all times. Did you notice rather than stating in the first verse **I shall not want**, we hear **I lack nothing!** This causes us to read through the list of what God provides us, fulfilling our true needs; serenity, rest, comfort, wholeness and most definitely needed - guidance. The psalmist continues by voicing their assurance in God, now addressing God directly:

Affirmation of Confidence

Yes, even if I should walk in an extremely dark valley,

I will fear no calamity.

For you are with me;

your club and your shepherd's staff provide me comfort. (4)

You set a table for me while my enemies look on;

You smear oil on my head; My cup overflows. (5)

This psalmist speaks to God with the strong words and complete trust. In the midst of those words comes the central statement of this psalm – **You, God, are with me.**

I have to say, this last week has felt like a long journey through that extremely dark valley without knowing when we will exit out the other side. My most obvious sin has been I have feared calamity this past week. I have been worried for the safety of my family members, my friends, for people all over the world, all of God's creation.

This psalm shakes me from that fear because it strongly reminds me that even in my fear, bogged down in my worrying, God has not abandoned me. God is right here with me. God is here with each and every one of us. I ask God for forgiveness for my weak faith and my overwhelming fear and once I stop my self-centered worrying, I realize that I live in the joy of God's forgiveness, benefitting and strengthened by God's abounding love. Such Love is greater than I can fully imagine or ever completely comprehend. But in God's Love I find hope and comfort. The hope we hear in the final verse of this psalm:

Expression of hope

Surely Yahweh's goodness and steadfast love will pursue me all the days of my life.

I shall reside in the "house of Yahweh" for days without end. (6)

As neglectful, as self-involved, as scared as I might be these words bring what I and we all desperately need to hear. God pursues us constantly, relentlessly, coming back after us over and over and over.

These words reminded me of my first marathon. My friend Marc and I traveled to Memphis for the race many years ago. Marc was and is still a much faster runner than I and during the marathon he would work his way ahead of me but every few miles he would circle back to check on me and give me moral support. I saw him several times come off side streets that were not

part of the race course, running a few extra blocks in order to loop in behind me. I'm guessing he ran over 28+ miles that day rather than just the 26.2.

This psalm reveals and reassures us of God's pursuit of us. We have God's endless, tireless pursuit, giving us hope to combat our fears. Pulling us out of our worries and fears, giving us strength to continue living as God's children. God gives us God's love that we soak up to comfort ourselves but then we also in turn share God's love with one another. Especially those struggling in this life. Those in need, those who have been forgotten or dismissed. The work God has given us, at all times but definitely during these stressful days, is to reach out to reassure each other that God is always with us. Remind ourselves and each other, we will reside in God's house throughout time, long after this worldly life. We have that promise fulfilled by God through His Son, Jesus the Christ. The truly anointed Son of God.

Let us pray:

Most loving God, we thank you for our family, friends, our life and all your creation.

Strengthen us, calm us, guide us in this time where there is so much fear and concern of the future. Send Your Holy Spirit among us, so that we may continue to carry out Your work here in this world, now and in the days ahead. And we thank you God for the gift of Your Son, Jesus the Christ, our Saviour and our Lord. For this we are eternally grateful.

Amen.

ELW #322 Oh, Love, How Deep vs 1-4