

March 15, 2020

John 4:5-42

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I am going to do something a bit new this morning in that we are going to read a Bible passage not found in the Revised Common Lectionary. That passage is Psalm 23 and found on the yellow insert in your bulletin. Will you please find that insert and then read Psalm 23 with me?

### **Psalm 23**

<sup>1</sup>The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup>The Lord makes me lie down  
in green pastures  
and leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup>You restore my soul, O Lord,  
and guide me along right pathways  
for your name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>Though I walk through the valley  
of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
and my cup is running over.

<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy  
shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell  
in the house of the Lord forever.<sup>1</sup>

I can't begin to count the number of times I have been asked to read Psalm 23 with God's faithful people over the years. I know it's a favorite of many of you. It's one of my favorites. So many people know it, even by heart able to speak it by memory.

People ask me to read it in good times; but more often than not when something is happening in their life that has shaken them to the core and left them in a state of fear, anxiety, and

uncertainty. Many times, they are experiencing illness or impending death. Psalm 23 acts as an anchor during these moments.

One of the first instances of this I can recall is while a chaplain following my first year of seminary. An elderly gentleman whom I called on, gravely ill and death most certainly upon his doorstep softly whispered to me following my entrance and announcement of who I was if I would please read Psalm 23, which I proceeded to do. Yet, I wasn't alone. I could faintly hear his voice as he followed along the best he could. Every so often I would quickly glance up and see his eyes almost full of joy even while tears formed at the corners and gently began to cascade down his wrinkled and worn skin.

When we finished, it just seemed appropriate to let the silence that now had broken into the room take center stage for a bit. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the promise and assurance of God's presence softly blew through the still room. After a few moments he looked up at me and said, "Thank you." I offered a short prayer and sensed my time was done. That is what he needed. It is how God came to him in his time of need. Through the words the Spirit had placed on his heart probably at a very young age. I walked out of the room, paused in the hallway, and thanked God for these words. Words he gave to this man. But also words he gave to me when, at very young stage of my pastoral calling, I truthfully wasn't certain what to say to the precious people of God I encountered in that hospital.

This is exactly why I came back to these storied, beloved, and sacred words this morning. We know them. The Spirit has etched them into our hearts and minds. They have shaped us, and they have carried us through dark valleys when our souls were parched, the trail before us seemed riddled with potholes and forks in the road with no signs indicating which way to travel. From my experience, it is in moments such as these we need an anchor. We need something to hold onto to steady our lives that seem out of control.

God is that anchor. The Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, the living water is the one who meets us at the well and offers us the refreshing water of life to overflow our empty cups and fill us with the love our aching hearts yearn for. He is our anchor. God's living word, the Bible, is our anchor. Psalm 23 is our anchor.

There is an elephant in the room which needs no explanation. I could choose not to talk about it; however, I don't think that I can do that this morning nor would it be appropriate. Our life seems to be changing at a rapid pace. The headlines in the news seem to change daily, if not hourly or by the minute and last night Governor Reynolds in her address to the people of Iowa let us know we are in a new phase of this pandemic spread of COVID-19. Health experts now know we have moved into "community spread" of the virus, which means they can't identify how affected individual contracted this virus. She also made a recommendation there be no gatherings of 250 people or more. This virus is a reality whether we want to acknowledge it or not. It is altering nearly every aspect of our lives, communities, nation and world in which we live.

Trust me, I didn't want to take the precautionary measures we have done this morning. I don't want to even consider the possibility we may need to cancel worship or other church related activities. To some, these precautionary steps may seem a bit too much; however, I would rather err on the side of caution.

We are living under the weight of much anxiety, much fear, and much uncertainty. We are traversing through uncharted waters and dark valleys in which we can't see the light. We have questions. We may even wonder if we should be here this morning. We may wonder where God is amidst all of this. We may hear someone cough in the grocery store and ask the question silently in our heads, "Does that person have COVID-19?" I want to assure you those are legitimate questions to ask. You are not alone in your thinking.

Yet, we can't let our fears consume us. It is in times such as these that our responses must be grounded in the second greatest command Jesus gave us, "Love your neighbor." Our response, our precautionary steps, are done out of love for our neighbors; especially, those who are most vulnerable. We must look past divisions that separate us. They no longer matter. Divisions such as what side of the political aisle we sit on. Divisions such as the color of our skin. Divisions such as our age, social economic status, gender, or sexual affiliation. Religious differences – whether we are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, an atheist or identify with another of the world's religion does not matter. Whether we are a citizen of this country or undocumented alien doesn't matter. What matters is that we are all human. We are all affected by this virus. We are connected whether we want to be or not. What matters is our response to one another. Compassionate, loving, and empathetic.

In times such as this it is easy to fall into the trap of watching out only for oneself or one's immediate family. I have been guilty of this. Thinking about what do I need if I am quarantined for 2 or more weeks? What does my daughter living in another city need? Perhaps, you have thought the same way. I want to assure you that is OK. We do need to make those contingency plans. This is serious.

Yet, we musn't forget about our neighbors. If we have those fears, think about how much greater the fears of our neighbors may be who may not have the means to get to the store to stock up on supplies. Perhaps, they are elderly and living alone without any family nearby. Perhaps, they have no means to pick up prescriptions. We musn't forget them. They are our neighbor and they, too, are in need. How do we come alongside them? How do we meet them at the well so they too can be comforted with the living water from heaven?

If you have asked yourself that question, "Where is God?" then Psalm 23 is your answer. It is our answer. It is the world's answer. God is here. God is with us. God will lead us. God will comfort us. Jesus will meet us at the well of uncertainty. The well of doubt and fear. The well that seems to have run dry. Jesus will meet us there and he will fill us with the water from the well of life. The well of hope. The well of strength. The well of salvation. The well of love, compassion, and care. The well in which the waters flow on in endless song that He is our

Shepherd and we shall not want for He is here. Right now, perhaps more than ever, we have a message to share with the world. We are not alone. They are not alone. God loves the world because God created the world, created all living creatures and God does not abandon that which God created. God is with us faithful people of God. Hold firm and confident in this promise!

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