

The 4th Sunday in Lent, March 22, 2020
“The Valley”
Psalm 23

Scripture Lessons:

I Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley...”

--Psalm 23:4

The psalm for the 4th Sunday in Lent is Psalm 23. What a fortuitous time for us to ponder one of the great literary compositions ever written offering comfort to people in times of need. The Psalmist is probably a king who, in his trouble, was confident in Yahweh’s ability to deliver him. Whatever the context, the Psalmist sings a song of confidence in Yahweh’s very personal and compassionate promise to deliver him from “*the darkest valleys*” in his life.

Shepherds understood the dangers of valleys. In constant search of fresh pastures for feeding, shepherds would often move their herds throughout the countryside. Valleys were dangerous places for a heard of sheep. Steep and narrow slopes lead down to ravines and dry riverbeds. The dangers of falling, injury or the threat from predators in valleys were very real. As the sun dipped below the surrounding hills, the long shadows made travel even more treacherous. It seemed as if danger was lurking around every twist and turn in the pathway into the valley. Valleys were scary places for shepherds. They are scary places for us today.

Our world has been ushered into a frightening valley in the past several weeks. Unemployment is skyrocketing. The Stock Markets seem to be in a free-fall. Small and large businesses alike are laying off employees in unprecedented numbers. Medical professionals on the front lines of the pandemic are woefully short of essential protective gloves, masks and gowns, and the need for hospital beds and ventilators far exceeds the supply chain. Over 84 million people in our country are following the directive to “shelter in place” in our homes for the immediate future. Currently, twenty four thousand Americans are infected with the Coronavirus. Medical professionals are racing against time to “flatten the curve” of new infections. Valleys are scary places.

Many of us at Hope Lutheran are wondering, “*When will we be able to meet again in our corporate worship?*” “*Will this last through Easter?*” “*What implications will this have on our church budget, or on my personal finances?*” “*Will we have to lay off some of our church staff?*” “*What can we do to help the most vulnerable in our community?*” These are legitimate questions from the valley. It is from the valley, the Psalmist writes Psalm 23.

**The LORD is my shepherd,
I lack nothing.**
**2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
3 he refreshes my soul.**
He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.
**4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**
**5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**
**6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

The psalmist speaks of God in very personal terms, “*The Lord is **my** shepherd*”. I invite you to take a moment and count the number of times the Psalmist uses the singular personal pronouns “*my*”, “*I*”, and “*me*” in describing the relationship of the shepherd to his sheep. The Shepherd-King YAHWEH is concerned about **you** as you walk through this scary valley. To the people in the days of David, God was the God of Israel. In the valley, they were comforted in knowing that God is the God of individuals.

God knows you by name. He knows your greatest worries and fears. He cares for you. Be encouraged. Like a good shepherd, God’s primary concern is the safety and welfare of his sheep. A shepherd carried a “*rod*” to club down wild animals and a “*staff*” to guide and comfort the sheep. Your very present (Ps. 46) and very personal God (Ps. 23) invites you to “*lie down in green pastures*” and experience the “*still waters*” of his peaceful and comforting presence in these uncertain times. He can refresh your soul. Maybe that is why this psalm has been so comforting to millions of people of various faith expressions over the centuries. Valleys are a part of life.

On Tuesday morning, I made a phone call to a dear member of our congregation, Ove Floystrup (*I have permission to use his name*). The purpose of my call was to offer him words of comfort in these trying times. Ove is 97 years old and in “lockdown” at a local retirement home. He is part of the “greatest generation” of Americans who understand valleys. He remembers the great depression. He lived through World War II. His life has consisted of many valleys. He has

experienced personal sacrifice and been a part of entire communities coming together in difficult times. He is worried, but not fearful. Ove's God has been with him his entire life since he arrived in America from Denmark with little money in his pocket. A carpenter by trade, his only prized possession was one hammer. He has known scarcity. He has lived in valleys before. God has taken care of him in the valleys. Ove shared with me one of his most treasured mantras in life:

“Nothing is ever so bad, that something good can't come from it.”

Ove went on to say that satellites in space are currently sending back images of the earth that display a cleaner atmosphere than has been seen in decades. Our lifestyles are changing out of necessity for our safety and the safety of our neighbors. Until my conversation with Ove, I did not realize the atmosphere is the beneficiary of our more simplified lifestyles.

I just saw a current picture of the canals of Venice, Italy. Ecologists are surprised to note the waters are a deep blue color where fish can actually be seen beneath the surface. The goodness of God is present with us, even in the valley. As I hung up the phone with Ove, I realized I had just spoken with *my* pastor. His words, his faith and his life were a deep comfort to me. Ove simply trusts in the wise guidance and compassionate care of our good shepherd, Jesus (Jn. 10).

The psalmist closes off his comforting song by reminding his listeners that the goodness of God is present with each one of us, even in the valley. As we follow the good shepherd through the valley, his goodness and mercy follow us. He says, *“surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*

Yes, unemployment is skyrocketing in our country. Yet, one Jonesboro, Arkansas property owner wants to make it a bit easier for restaurant owners who occupy his facilities. Young Investment Company announced Tuesday night on social media it would *“not expect its restaurant tenants to pay April rent.”* Instead of paying rent, Clay Young urged owners to *“pay your employees and take care of your family. We will get through this together.”* The company's downtown Jonesboro properties house several of the area's favorite restaurants including Eleanor's Pizzeria, Roots, Main Street Coffee, The Parsonage, and City Wok. The goodness and love of God is following the shepherd and his sheep into Jonesboro, Arkansas.

Yes, in Spain medical professionals have been taxed beyond belief and like millions of other first responders, are finding solidarity in the message written on their cardboard signs, *“We come to work for you. Please stay home for us.”* Hundreds of medical professionals in Spain were comforted this week when there was a call on social media to go out to balconies and windows at 10:00 p.m. to give a huge ovation to thank and encourage hospital workers for their service. One post on Facebook stated, *“It is 10:05 p.m. and I can hear the roar from the other side of the*

closed double glass windows.” The goodness and love of God is following the good shepherd and his sheep into Spain.

Italy has become the new epicenter of what is becoming the most serious pandemic of our lifetime. Yesterday, over 793 people died in Italy alone. Yet, the goodness and love of God is following the good shepherd and his sheep into Italy. This past week, I came across an article regarding the life of Dr. Marcello Natali. This is Dr. Natali’s story. He never left the front line in a small northern Italian town when the coronavirus exploded more than three weeks ago. In his now famous interview with *Euronews* in early March, Dr. Natali complained of a critical shortage of medical supplies for medical professionals working around the clock to care for infected patients. Ultimately, he was forced to work with patients without the use of protective gloves. The front line of this deadly virus is where the 57-year-old physician died this week from the disease he fought so hard to contain. He did not agree to a bed in the ICU for treatment because he did not want to take a bed from someone else. Good shepherds sacrifice for their sheep.

Dr. Natali’s story is one of millions of medical professionals who are walking through the valley of the shadow of death...God’s goodness will follow us all the days of our lives and beyond. Our caring, good shepherd will dwell with us forever and ever...especially in the valleys. Please join me in praying for all of those on the front lines of this crisis....

Almighty God, as more and more people get sick, healthcare workers and first responders like police, firefighters, grocery clerks and others in public service put their lives in harms way every day by simply going to work. They are working longer hours with fewer supplies and with more risk of contracting the new coronavirus themselves. Renew their energy and sustain them on long shifts. Bring your protection upon them as they work with patients and the public sector. Multiply their supplies so they have the protective items needed to stay safe on the job. Inspire and invigorate the research doctors developing better tests to diagnose the virus, create vaccines to prevent it, and identify protocols to eliminate the disease’s spread.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our good shepherd.

Amen

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” —Psalm 23:4 (NIV)

Prayer for a Pandemic

*May we who are merely inconvenienced
remember those whose lives are at stake.*

*May we who have no risk factors
remember those most vulnerable.*

*May we who have the luxury of working from home
remember those who must choose between
preserving their health or making their rent.*

*May we who have the flexibility to care for our
children when their schools close
remember those who have no options.*

*May we who have to cancel our trips
remember those that have no safe place to go.*

*May we who are losing our margin money
in the tumult of the economic market
remember those who have no margin at all.*

*May we who settle in for a quarantine at home
remember those who have no home.*

As fear grips our country, let us choose love.

*During this time when we cannot physically
wrap our arms around each other,
let us yet find ways to be the loving
embrace of God to our neighbors. Amen.*

– Cameron Bellm, 2020

