

Worship May 3, 2020

Reading:

Psalm 23 New International Version (NIV)

A psalm of David.

1 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,[a]

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.

Message

Perhaps one of the best-loved pieces of scripture, Psalm 23 is well known among people of both Jewish and Christian faiths. Its wonderful imagery speaks of the ways God cares for the flock. Over time there have been many disparaging comments made about sheep – that they aren't very bright and are not very discerning about who they follow – but the good shepherd knows their needs and provides. It seems the good shepherd looks beyond aberrant behaviors to guide and protect those in his care.

During this time of COVID I've been thinking about who is trying to shepherd us, making sure we are guided to safe places and providing, as best possible, for people's needs. I think of the doctors, nurses and many other support staff who are not only caring for those who are ill, but are trying to find best practices for us, keeping us informed about what we need to do to be safe, and all those who are seeking answers through testing as well as seeking treatments and investigating vaccines. We've certainly been seeing some unruly sheep, but we're also seeing many who want to follow the shepherds in our midst.

The Psalm beautifully describes God's care for us and it has also been used to speak of Jesus. In this time of great uncertainty, it is reassuring to be able to trust in God as the one who walks beside us, even in these unsettling times. As I thought about this image of a shepherding God, I began to think of others, perhaps not as superb at caring for those in their charge, but none-the-less following God's example. I'm hearing amazing examples of teachers who are going more than an extra mile to work with their students in this challenging new environment. I've heard some teachers say this is an important time in the school year when much that has been taught earlier comes together for students. And many are feeling the "end of year" pressure and realizing that some things that were being looked forward to like proms and special graduation ceremonies just can't happen, but teachers are trying to make sure they do their best to see their students get what they need to be ready for a new school year in the fall. All of this requires them to find ways to attend differently to different student's needs – even when they can't be physically present with them.

As I was thinking about teachers, I am remembering a story – I believe it has been made into a film – but it tells of a young teacher who got placed in a really challenging inner city classroom. There were students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and apparently they were used to being "written off" as students. The teacher tried so hard, but was often frustrated. One day she caught a glimpse of something that might reach them, but when she went to the school administrator she was told there was no extra money for the books the teacher was hoping to use. So she took on another job to raise the funds. She had asked a question about the Holocaust in class and discovered only one student even knew about it. Her answer was to do two things: have the students read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, but also to answer a challenge from some of the students that 'she didn't know them' she provided journals for the student to write in to tell about their thoughts and happenings. It took some time for the journals to be used, but finally there seemed to be a break through. Students began to write telling of things that were concerning them like the riots happening in L.A. or violence in their neighborhood or home. Perhaps it was being able to share their stories and finding that their teacher really cared about them, but the atmosphere in the classroom changed dramatically. Then part of what this teacher introduced them to were events in the civil rights movement – the fact that people who were treated unjustly were finding a voice and a way to begin to make change.

This teacher has become a kind of shepherd for me – someone who cared deeply about her students and made sure they got the kind of nourishment they could accept and then use. They were fed with knowledge and understanding, and were empowered to engage the world around them. The green pastures and still waters looked different for them, but were the things the students needed so they could walk through their own valleys and find sustenance for their lives.

As I think about this story I can hear that being a shepherd is not an easy job. I don't think those students could have told their teacher what they needed other than to say she didn't know them, but she cared enough – respected them enough – to seek things

that would provide for them. And not just once, but stayed engaged.

Who are the shepherds in our congregation? I can readily name the Parish nurses who not only lift prayer concerns but try to address individual concerns as they arise – follow through with people's needs. I've not experienced Camp Fellowship yet, but from things I hear many youth have been nurtured there. There must be wonderful shepherds among their leaders, something we may not get to do this year.

In these challenging days may we find hope and comfort in these ancient words that remind us God is with us all the days of our lives.

Prayer

O Holy One,

I awake to bird song and give thanks for the bursting forth of spring. It is as if a new energy is breaking into our world as flowers and green life emerge. No wonder the birds sing.

We give thanks for your gifts, which are all around us and especially in the people we know who are finding new ways to work in this world's challenges. We would ask for gifts of patience and understanding as we face a world that seems so different today than a few weeks ago. Social distancing is making us appreciate our interconnectedness.

There are many among us who need your presence, Holy One – your healing presence for physical as well as emotional challenges and incredible losses, your guidance to get them through times of 'not enough', your reminder that you walk with us even in the loneliest places.

We continue to pray for all those who are on the front lines of this pandemic that they may remain healthy despite incredible challenges, that they may have the resources they need to continue in their work until this battle is won.

We pray, too, for all those from our church family who need your healing presence – for Barbara and David and any others who are struggling, for all who are in assisted living – Yarka and Geri, Sid and Nancy, Trudy and Lottie and all others who continue to live among our most vulnerable. We lift prayers for Belinda's family and especially for wisdom for all our leaders.

Guide us this day and always that we may be compassionate and wise in all we do, trusting in you when our own resources seem not enough.