

MY SHEPHERD

March 22, 2020 Audio Worship at Calvary UMC

Psalm 23

WELCOME

Peace be with you!

Welcome to this beautiful worship experience where we connect more deeply, in our hearts with the Holy Spirit dancing amidst us. St. Francis of Assisi said Christ is “the one whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” Though we cannot see one another, God is with us, moving and working and restoring us with abounding grace. Even at home we can respond with a resounding “Amen! Amen!”

Let us gather using a tradition practiced at Na Sonje in Haiti. It focuses our bodies and spirits to share all things, to share love, healing, good vibrations, and peace. Simply hold the palm of your right hand so it faces down and the palm of your left hand so it faces up.

The palm of your right hand, facing down, is held with a giving Spirit, and the palm of your left hand is up with a receiving Spirit. One hand giving and the other hand receiving...

All together, breathe deeply; breathe in all of the positive energy.

All together, breathe out; breathe out love, healing, and peace to the world.

Breathe deeply again...and again...Amen! Amen!

PRAYER

With our bodies and spirits centered in the Eternal One, let us pray:

Creator God, we come with open Spirits prepared to give and receive, to connect with the web of life born out of your love. You are the Alpha and the Omega. We celebrate your glory and beauty in the early spring buds, the song of the birds, and the warm days. In this season of Lent, you have brought our lives to a stillness, focusing on the very essential need of breath. We are dust; you are breath. Hold us in your merciful arms as we learn the depth of your breath in our lives and reveal the source of love and healing through our Liberator, Jesus Christ. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

On several occasions this week, people have shared their longing for one of the most beloved Psalms; the one they memorized as a child; the one to which they turn in times of despair.

Psalm 23. So thought it would be appropriate for us to share in the scripture reading together.

We will use a call and response. I will read a line and pause for you to repeat at home.

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff--
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell
in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

MESSAGE

Brothers and sisters, this is an unprecedented time in which we share with the entire world uncertainty in the very human fragility of life. There isn't a single person on earth untouched by the coronavirus, directly or indirectly. The coronavirus is more than a physical illness; it's a darkness over the whole land (Matthew 27:45), like the hours Jesus spent suffering on the cross. Its tendrils reveal the most basic truths of our common humanity, and the sounds of wailing can be heard by the mothers and daughters of all the nations. As we listen to music played across neighborhoods in Italy, as we practice social distancing to protect our most vulnerable, and as we sacrifice loss of work, income, and accessibility...we discover the interrelated nature of all living things. It points directly to One Source of Life. It points us to the path of solidarity where we must together face our suffering with a force of love, healing, and peace.

In our shared faith, we find comforting words that help us face this uncertainty. These words are in the roots of our tradition: Psalm 23. In our community - gathered as we may be - we are one community in Christ, we connect not just with those gathered together now but with those for thousands of years before us and those after us. The Writings in the Hebrew Bible, which includes the book of Psalms, offer us the authors' thoughts and search for God rather than God's addresses to them. In these times when our fragile and finite bodies of dust face suffering, illness, loneliness,

fear, and darkness, we, too, seek a God who feels absent; we cry out for a refuge, a healer, a companion, and a light to find our way. Here we meet the deepest longing of our souls, the Source of Life, Creator God, who liberates us. Here we meet God as our psalmist claims...the Lord is my shepherd.

It is no accident that these words begin the song: the Lord is my shepherd. The writer is claiming an identity. The writer establishes God as shepherd, and thus claims his identity as being part of God's flock, a sheep. If the Lord is my shepherd, then I belong to God and the flock which gathers in the Shepherd's love and protection. These words surrender our souls not just to the Shepherd but also to the flock, to belonging to the community. There is no deeper wanting or needing than this, an unconditional love and acceptance. This is the beginning point.

Immediately, the writer exclaims, "I shall not want." The image of Shepherd as caretaker and protector has often led us to imagine that Creator God will meet all my needs. "I shall not want" has taken on new meaning as we experience the impact of the disease and social distancing.

- People are sick and dying all around the world. "I want" healing. Is that asking too much, Creator God?
- Our hospitals and equipment are ill-equipped to manage the rapid spread. "I want" a cure to halt the pandemic. Is that asking too much, Creator God?
- People are risking their lives to care for the sick, to provide all of us food and prescriptions, to keep us safe. "I want" them to be protected, unharmed. Is that asking too much, Creator God?
- Our bodies have become a hidden source of illness, striking the very family and friends whom we love most dearly. Our touch, our closeness - it can harm to the point of death. That's salty stuff. "I want" just to hold my family and friends. Is that asking too much, Creator God?
- Images of the bare grocery aisles - entire aisles - come to mind. "I want" to know my family will not go hungry. Is that asking too much, Creator God?
- In retirement homes, people are crying out with their loneliness. We want to see, hear, and touch our family and friends. Is that asking too much, Creator God?

What other cries, longings do you feel right now? God wants to know. Our Shepherd is listening. Our "I wants" seem so very basic today. We are working our way down from houses, cars, phones, televisions, vacations...to the very core of our human lives: breath. If God cannot give us even this, then what promise is there in this exclamation - I shall not want?

The writer claims it. There is only ONE want...God, belonging to God, to the very source of all creation. We belong to God in life and in death. We belong to all of creation, to God's flock, with or without breath. AND when we claim God as our Shepherd, we belong to a flock. We are joined together as ONE in God, ONE in Christ, and through this whole community, God and all others, we shall never want. God unites us so that we may thrive in a garden of love and peace. We need not worry, for we never walk alone.

When we accept each other, all people, all creation in all life, then we want to love one another. Claiming that the Lord is my Shepherd is so important right now. It calls us into a place of connection where we see all people and love all people. Our “wants” will be met when we recognize the needs of others beyond ourselves. Unity in Christ forces us to look beyond ourselves and care for everyone. Friends, we must respond to the needs of everyone. We must not think just of ourselves and our family. We must stretch beyond the walls of our homes, churches, counties, state, and nation into the world. We must do the very basic things:

- 1) Stand still in our lives and hold onto the most important thing of all - our breath. Claim life. Claim God.
- 2) Follow the guidelines for social distancing. Though you may not feel the danger of the virus, the social distancing is to protect ALL people. You cannot look at a person by age or health and determine the vulnerability of this person to the virus. You do not know if you have come in contact with the virus. Social distancing is for the common good of all the world.
- 3) Maintain all health and safety guidelines, washing your hands and not touching your face.
- 4) Know that there is enough...there is enough food and water. There is enough when we take only what we need and do not store up to protect our own. Allow your life to be transformed as you begin to assess your very basic needs and live more simply.
- 5) Share with one another. Share the food and water. Share the sorrows and fears. Share the time as if it is a gift. Share in the joy of life.
- 6) Pray! I encourage all of you to be in ceaseless prayer. On Sunday, March 29th, we are hosting a 24-hour prayer vigil. You can sign up on the website for a 30-minute prayer block or call the office to schedule a time.

Our Shepherd is with us. Our Shepherd wields the rod and staff; our Shepherd is a fierce, compassionate defender. With our Shepherd and flock...as one, we find all we want. The writer of Psalm 23 describes his experience once he claims the Lord is my Shepherd:

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff--
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;*

*my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell
in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

I met with Tristan and Julie (McGettrick) this week. At one point, I noticed that Tristan was wearing the cross he received from our service on the first Sunday of Lent. It took my breath away for a moment. It connected me with Tristan...in our common call to take up our crosses. It reminded me that I am not alone. It was such a beautiful moment in the midst of this difficult time. We are together, in Christ. The Lord is my Shepherd, and I shall not want.

And all God's people say, "Amen! Amen!"

LORD'S PRAYER

Let us pray with one another the prayer Jesus taught us...say it aloud with heart!

CHALLENGE

This week as an offering I challenge you to write or record your own song to God. Our Shepherd is listening and responding to our cries. So we write our own songs, in our own words and images of today, to tell our story...so those who follow will know the Source of Life who restores with tenderness and mercy. I encourage you to write your own Psalm or record it (sound or video or picture) and email it to us. Let us all hear the cries so that we may carry them together.

CLOSING

As we end this service, let us join together as we did in the beginning. The palm of your right hand, facing down, is held with a giving Spirit, and the palm of your left hand is up with a receiving Spirit. One hand giving and the other hand receiving...

We are united in Christ, "the one whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." Nothing can separate us, and so we remain as one. The Lord is Our Shepherd.

Receive your benediction:

May the God who spoke light into darkness,
who claimed victory over death,
who is our Shepherd,
our protector, provider, and healer,
bless you with power, grace, and hope to share in this hurting world.
The peace of God be with you all, now and always.