

2020 03 22 – Social Distance

Psalm 23

- ¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;
³ he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
 for his name's sake.
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.
- ⁶ 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.

We are living in a time of great fear and uncertainty, a shadow time. We are living in a world of empty streets, empty restaurants, empty churches and empty shelves. We are living in a world of over-crowded supermarkets, overflowing hospitals and cemeteries taxed beyond capacity. The number of cases of COVID-19 in Canada is now over 1000 and in the world over 300,000. As of this morning, 13,642 people have died as a result of this virus. This past week in Saskatchewan we have gone from 6 to 44 cases and health authorities assure us that it will get worse before it gets better.

This health crisis has also initiated a financial crisis. We all know someone who has been laid-off work, someone who doesn't know how they will pay their rent, someone who is worried about losing the business they have worked so hard to build. Maybe it's you. And, of course, we are all watching with horror as the stock market crashes and our savings disappear.

The worst thing is we don't know. We don't know who will get sick and who will die. We don't know when the peak will hit here in Saskatchewan. We don't know how long it will be until this is over. We are living in a time of great fear and uncertainty, a shadow time.

Of course, we are afraid. Of course, we are experiencing incredible stress and anxiety. I don't know about you, but I've woken up this week in the middle of night and been unable to go back to sleep. I've found myself exhausted at the end of the day, not just from an increased workload, but also from increased worry and stress. I've also spent too long in front of the television, or reading the news online and felt overwhelmed by the stories coming from Italy, Spain, Iran and all the other countries where the death tolls are rising exponentially.

We are afraid and worried and many of us are also physically alone. In a time when a hug or a handshake or even a touch on the shoulder could bring so much comfort we are doing what we must, and we are practicing social distancing and self-isolation. We are living in a time of great fear and uncertainty, a shadow time and for many of us, we are doing it alone.

And so we turn to scripture: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

It’s amazing that the 23rd psalm just happened to be one of the scripture readings included in the lectionary for this Sunday. This psalm was written by a man in a crisis situation. We don’t know exactly what was happening in his life, but we do know that, for centuries, his words have given people comfort in times of trouble.

He wrote:

⁴ 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.

Whether we call this time in which we are living, “the darkest valley,” or “the valley of the shadow of death” or just “a shadow time,” it doesn’t matter – they are all the same. These are difficult times: times of fear, uncertainty and even anger or grief. These are times when it is easy to feel utterly alone.

The good news is that we are not alone. Even though social distancing keeps us physically apart, spiritually we never truly alone. The Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, the Good Shepherd is with us, no matter how lonely we may feel.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
³ he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name’s sake.

In this shadow time of fear and uncertainty, we are looking with anxiety to the future, but the psalmist is telling us that the God of Love leads us to the present. In any one single moment, in this moment, it is possible to feel the courage and

the comfort that comes from the Essence of Love. I felt it this week as I watched the morning sunrise and experienced the beauty of God's creation in the midst of chaos. I felt it this week, during a Zoom conference call just like this when I was able to see and hear colleagues in ministry from around this province. I felt it this week, as I read emails of concern and encouragement, emails that came from some of you. I felt it this week, as I listened to sacred music, music that spoke of God's all-encircling love

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

It is not protection from the future but rather the presence of the Good Shepherd, in even our deepest shadow, in our darkest day, that is our peace. So I invite

you to be

that presence for others. I invite you to reach out to others in whatever way you can: to make a phone call, to write a letter, to type an email, to Facetime or Zoom. I invite you to reach out and financially support the work of charities here and around the world. In this time of social distance and self-isolation it is still possible to do God's work in the world.

But even more important, I invite you, in the words of Steve Garnass-Holmes to:

. . .follow that Shepherd
into this moment. Be present.
Stop and breathe, and breathe again.
No matter what happens in the future
God is here, with you, now. Be present.

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