

Fourth Sunday in Lent - March 22, 2020

Readings: I Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Presbyterian World Service & Development Litany:

(Written by the Rev. Iona MacLean (The Church of Saint David, Halifax))

God provides for every need
**guidance in right paths,
presence in darkest valleys,
nourishment beyond measure.**

God shines light on the world in Jesus
**opening eyes that are blind,
exposing prejudice and fear,
offering new understanding of life's good purpose.**

But we persist in our own ways
**judging by appearance,
denying others' experience,
hoarding what we can for ourselves.**

Lord, have mercy
Christ, have mercy
Lord, have mercy
Happy are those whose sin is forgiven.

Let us pray:
**God our Creator, you are the Source of light and love,
rest and nurture, hope and peace.
Open our eyes to your goodness.
Empower us to live as children of light,
bringing a rich harvest of all that is good and right and true.
Enlighten us to see the world with your eyes of love.
So may all people know
your goodness and mercy forever;
through Jesus Christ the Light of the world. Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Psalm 23 (NRSV)

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.

Reflection:

Psalm 23, the so-called “Shepherd Psalm,” is so familiar to us that its comfort washes over us and we feel as safe as sheep lying down in green pastures, fed, watered, protected. It is in fact a wonderful statement of faith, of trust, in the God who is love.

But there is more.

Psalm 23 acknowledges that sheep get lost, endangered, threatened.

There are dark valleys, places of death. There are enemies. Life is scary.
And sheep don’t deal well with fear.

But what does this divine Shepherd do?

Leads the sheep, protects them with rod and staff,
but also makes peace by preparing a place of hospitality in the midst of enemies—and
by the ancient rules, once you share a meal, you are no longer enemies.

There are echoes of Isaiah’s vision of the peaceable kingdom ushered in by the Messiah, where “the wolf shall live with the lamb, . . . the lion shall eat straw with the ox. . . .” [*Isa. 11:6a,7b*] And might this be where Paul gets the idea in Romans 12: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; . . . do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”? [*Romans 12:20-21*] The Shepherd is also the Peacemaker.

There is still more.

An interesting fact about translation from the ancient languages comes up in verse 6. An ancient Greek translation of the original Hebrew used the words “and my dwelling” from which English translations arrive at “And I shall dwell. . . .” But the Hebrew actually says, “and I shall *return*. . . .” Both translations are acceptable, but it is possible that the Hebrew text actually proclaims: “I shall return to the house of the Lord for the rest of my days.”

It’s not an earthshaking difference but it’s an interesting image. Verses 1 to 3 describe the wanderer being led by still waters and led in right paths. The wanderer then passes through the dark valley and then “returns” (led by Yahweh) to the house of the Lord.

The divine Shepherd is the divine Peacemaker is the divine Guide.

God gives us rest and sure direction, protects us in the extreme situations in life, never lets us out of sight even though we stray, and brings us home again to a reconciliation with those from whom we are alienated and to a reunion with the very Guide who has never left us.

A pilgrimage—that’s what life is—a journey through good times and bad, pleasant places and fearsome ones, easy and difficult.

Sometimes we feel on top of things.

And sometimes--like now in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic--we feel lost and scared, not knowing where to turn. Lost in anxiety or bewilderment, sorrow or shame, illness or loneliness.

But even when we feel lost, God knows where we are because God is right beside us or a step ahead of us, showing the way, or carrying us over the rough spots. Says the Psalmist: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, . . . you are with me.”

Believing that God is with us helps us through even the most trying of times. As St. Paul says, “there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” [*Rom. 8:39*]

Even in the barren and bleak deserts of life, there are green pastures and still waters. Even in the darkest valley, the good and gracious Guide is there to defend us. Even in the presence of enemies, even the enemy of death, there is the assurance of reconciliation and new life—the Last Supper becomes the Resurrection meal. And we have the sense and experience of returning home to the Guide who really has never left our side. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: (*adapted from one offered by The Rev. Amanda Currie, [Moderator](#) of the 2019 General Assembly*)

Loving God, we thank you for your presence with your children through the anxiety of the COVID-19 situation.

Thank you for wise leadership and health authorities that guide us in making good decisions for our communities.

Thank you for doctors, nurses, medical researchers and technicians, and all those who are working to care for the sick and develop treatments for this illness.

Thank you for cleaning staff and caregivers and volunteers, and all who are working to keep our environments clean and safe.

Thank you for truck drivers and grocery staff and others working to provide the necessities of life.

Thank you for pastors, elders, neighbours, and friends who are working to care for those who are vulnerable, alone or afraid.

Thank you for the peace and comfort that comes from knowing that we are not alone.

Compassionate God, be with those who are especially vulnerable in these days:

our David's Place guests and all who lack adequate shelter and food,
those who are ill and those who struggle with the limitations of age,
those such as musicians and other artists whose livelihood has vanished for now,
those who are working very long hours for the well-being of all.

Grant us all patience as we wait; grant us all courage as we serve you and care for one another; grant us all hope as we trust in you for the future.

We join our praise and our prayers with your people in every time and place, grateful for our unity in Christ with them, and for your promise of life abundant for all; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.
Amen.*