

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 3.22.2020



## Presence in the Valley

The Reverend Pen Peery

Psalm 23

Our Scripture for today both familiar and a comfort. I'll be from the most familiar and beloved translation of the passage – the King James Version. Listen with me for the word of God – a word that we all need to hear.

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The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

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[May the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.]

A friend from church posted a quote on Friday that pretty much summed it up for me. He said, “This week has been the longest month of my life!”

It has been a full week.

Full of adjustments

Full of worry

Full of headlines that continue to change

It's been a week when we've all had to learn new things.

Like how to teach kids at home

Or how to make home into an office

Or how to move about in public places while maintaining a six-foot berth

This has been a week when we've moved a little past shock and started to wrap our minds around the implications of all of this...implications that we certainly are just beginning to grasp.

Like what this means for the economy – and our own financial futures  
And how much we depend on the people who don't have the privilege of social distancing (like our mail carriers, or grocery-store clerks, or sanitation workers)

And what this means for our healthcare system (and its employees) who are managing – and will continue to be managing – a crush of patients that threaten to push past the limits of capacity.

A week ago – I hoped we were all over-reacting a little bit for the sake of being safe. Now, we wait to see whether stronger restrictions will come our way as they have other states like California and New York and Illinois.

That's a lot to pack into seven days. They've been full to say the least.

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One irony of this past week for me is that while our society was spinning at a feverish pace to adjust to these new realities – and my mind spinning to try to keep up – the ways I spent the **actual** hours of the day became more elemental. Maybe like you, I am cooking more (and washing a lot more dishes). I am spending more idle time with my wife and my kids. Instead of March Madness – we had an Uno tournament bracket. I’m connecting more (at a distance) with my neighbors, and even had a Zoom happy hour to catch up with some far-flung college friends who I haven’t called...well, in quite a while.

There’s still a lot of work to be done – meetings and decisions to be had and made – and I frankly don’t know how we are all pulling it off – but I find the days are **defined** by things like food and table, and checking in on the ones I love, and making sure I am getting enough sleep and exercise.

And if you had asked me a week ago, I am not sure those would have been the things that defined my time.

I’ve noticed the same thing about the church.

No – it’s still not ideal that we are here in an empty room. I am ready to see your faces again – to shake your hands, give you a hug, baptize babies, see the community gathered.

But I’ll have to say, in the last week I don’t think I’ve ever been clearer about the church’s purpose or its importance. There is a lot we cannot do because of our need to contain the virus. Yet, the ministry that **is going on** through the church is elemental:

Caring

Feeding

Rallying around those who are in need: in our congregation and beyond it

Encouraging conversations about faith in the home

Claiming the importance of worship – of time that we set aside to put the rest of our time in perspective



These are the main things, aren't they?  
That is how we best show Christ to one another, isn't it?

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A week ago the worship leaders sat down to think about what to focus on in this strange, new time that we are living in. The plans we had long-ago carefully made all of a sudden felt hopelessly irrelevant. What we decided to do was to shape our worship around those passages in Scripture that we tend to reach for in times of need. The twenty-third Psalm is at the top of that list.

Because that's what we do when it feels like the earth is shifting on its axis...when the ground is moving under our feet, right? We reach out to be reminded that we belong. We reach out to remember that life is about more than the disease we suffer, or the death we fear, or the consequences we face. We reach out to the One who promises to shepherd us – to gather us into the flock and keep our life.

When I have read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm at bedsides, and cemeteries, and jail-cells, and funerals – I have seen the power of God in the faces of those who are suffering or dying or grieving or anxious. I have watched as the good news of the gospel washes over people – when these words become more than the things we always say and are transformed into declarations of freedom and grace.

One of the great privileges of what I do is to be present when people are moved by the Holy Spirit – when they understand that the Lord is their shepherd. That they do not have to fear. That when everything else in life fades to the background – or falls apart – these words hold true. Steady.

What I've seen over years of speaking these words into people's pain and anxiety is what happens when the promise of this Scripture becomes personal and real.

I've seen what happens when God moves from being an idea – to someone with whom we have a relationship.



I've seen what happens when people move from knowing (in a theoretical way) that we cannot make it through this life on our own, to **knowing** (in an in-your-guy kind of way) that we depend on God's guidance and provision – and that we would not want it any other way.

It turns out – that's the message that is embedded into the heart of this most familiar and beloved Psalm. It's how the Psalm is built.

The original language of the Psalms, of course, is Hebrew. In the Hebrew, there are twenty-six words that lead to the heart of the Psalm and then twenty-six words that follow.

The heart of the Psalm is this: “thou art with me.”

You are with me.

God is with us.

Before this heartbeat of the message, in those first 26 words, the Psalmist talks **about** God – “the Lord is my shepherd...he restores my soul; he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

After the main message...the elemental promise, though, in those last 26 words, the Psalmist talks **to** God – “your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before my enemies. You fill my cup to overflowing.”

It is language of relationship and trust. It is personal.

That is what sustains us when we walk through the valley in the shadow of all that threatens to destroy.

The good news that God is with us isn't just at the heart of the Psalm – it is at the heart of the Bible.



We see that promise shot through all the pages of Scripture – in the Old Testament...from Genesis to the Psalms to the Prophets. And in the New Testament we see it, too. From the moment God chose to enter the world through the flesh and blood of a baby in a manger – to the resurrected savior who made promises to his disciples from a mountaintop – to the God who stands at the end of the age...arms open wide in welcome.

God is with us.

Not just in theory – but in life.

As I stand here this morning, talking about the good news of God's presence in and among us – I can't help but to remember this room on Christmas Eve – full of people and candles and hope. I remember telling a story two Christmases ago – which comes to mind even as the trees and flowers bud to new life today.

It is a story a friend of mine named Agnes Norfleet shared with me that reminds me of how God's presence in our lives enables us to move past fear. A story the author Anne LaMott tells about her son's early years.

Anne had taken two-year-old Sam to Lake Tahoe for a vacation. Lake Tahoe, along with beautiful blue water, is also known for some pretty glitzy gambling casinos. The rooms have black-out curtains - that block all the sunlight - for the convenience of those who like to stay up all night, and like to sleep all day.

One afternoon Anne put her son down to sleep in his playpen in the completely dark bedroom while she went to do some writing in the adjacent room.

A little while later she heard the toddler knocking on the door from the inside. Somehow he had managed to get out of the playpen, and push the button on the doorknob and lock himself in.

He was calling, "Mommy, Mommy," and she was saying,

"Just jiggle the doorknob, darling, push the button again."



Of course, he could not see the doorknob in the darkened room, and when it became clear to him that his mother could not open the door, panic set in. He began sobbing.

Anne did everything she could to get the door to work; she called the rental agency where she left a message; she called the manager, running back and forth to comfort her young son.

All the while Sam was in the dark, terrified.

Finally, she did the only thing she **could** do, which was to lie down, and slide her fingers underneath the door through a few centimeters of space. She told him to bend down and find her fingers. Somehow he did.

They stayed like that for a really long time, his tiny finger tips touching her fingers in the dark, reaching across the divide, feeling each other's presence and comfort and love.

That is what God does for us through the person of Jesus.

God lies down on the floor of this earth, and reaches out to us - finger to baby finger.

God reaches into our isolation and fear.

And no matter how dark it is, God assures us we are never left completely alone.

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We don't know how long we will be walking in the valley.

I wish we did.

I hope it is quick.



I pray it will pass without too much more damage, and death, and distress.

It's been a week.

There could well be many more ahead.

If so – and the things we're used to continue to fall away...

if life continues to gravitate toward its more elemental nature...

let us remember what is at the center of our faith and the most basic truth of our existence...

that God is with us – and will be with us – through and through.

May that truth come alive for us –

So that God's presence becomes more than an idea –

but a gift that leads us into deeper relationship with the one on whom we depend.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

