

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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Psalm 23
John 9:1-41

From today's psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Light, living water, bread, good shepherd. These images that describe Jesus are found throughout John's gospel. In today's reading from John we heard Jesus referred to as "light" in the story of the healing of the blind man; if you look at the very next chapter, you will see Jesus portrayed as a good shepherd. Images like this help us grasp the nature of God, they help us realize that God provides what we need—sustenance, guidance, truth, and love.

These images are not only found in John's gospel, but throughout the Bible. For instance, in the familiar psalm appointed for today we also encounter the image of God as a shepherd. This psalm is often said at funeral services, not to express sadness but instead to offer words of hope and comfort—this is a message that we can all use right now.

Psalm 23 is so familiar to many of us that we may sometimes recite it without really focusing in on the words, so let's take a closer look. It begins with the well-known refrain: "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want." Shepherds, as we know, are responsible for guiding, feeding, and protecting their charges. We can take comfort in thinking about God in this way—it gives us a feeling of security in troubling times.

And in these troubling times, the next verse provides us some great advice. It says, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters." These peaceful images of pastures and ponds remind us that nature is a wonderful healer. Even while we are practicing social distancing, if we are able, we should get outside and take a walk or even just sit and rest. We will be restored by taking the time to notice the sky and the budding trees and the birds that are starting to sing their spring songs.

The psalm, though, is not all flowers and rainbows. It recognizes that life brings with it challenges, as we are all experiencing right now, some more than others. There are people who are truly walking "through the valley of the shadow of death" as they face the effects of COVID-19, and others who are fearful because they or their loved ones are especially vulnerable to illness or financial hardship. The psalm reassures us, though, that we do not walk through this alone, that God, our shepherd, is right there with us. In this season of Lent, we remember that Jesus also "walked through the valley of the shadow of death." His courage and faith in facing all that he did, and his ultimate triumph over what we fear most, provide us inspiration and hope.

The example of Jesus and the message of this beautiful psalm remind us that we can take comfort in the constant, loving presence of God. As Christians, we must also see this as a call to prayerful action. We are God's hands in this world; it is through us that God, who is love, can act. The psalm says, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." Let's think about what we can each do to be sure that others have an abundant table before them, with enough food, enough medical care, enough love to sustain them. What can we do? First, for our own sake and that of others, carefully follow the guidelines being set for us so that we prevent the spread of the virus. Beyond that, there are so many options we can choose from to offer help. Here are a few ideas: send a donation to Master's Manna, since we are not able to collect donations at church each week; give blood to the Red Cross, which is facing a shortage; make a donation to an organization like Episcopal Relief & Development or The Center for Disaster Philanthropy; order or purchase food for someone you know who cannot or should not leave their home; make phone calls and write letters to friends, neighbors, and loved ones, especially those who you know are feeling isolated. I'm sure you can think of many more ideas that work for you. In this challenging time, it is up to each of us to do our part to make sure that everyone can say, "I shall not want."

In the coming days, I encourage you to read Psalm 23 again, as often as you need. The psalm reassures us that, with God as our shepherd, goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. And with God as our shepherd, we can each have the strength to bring goodness and mercy to those around us so that we may all "dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."