

ORDER OF SERVICE

March 22, 2020

People came from the north and the south, from the east and the west, and gathered together in this time and way to worship as one body. No matter whether we are gathered or scattered we are one in Christ. Thanks be to God!

Welcome & Announcements

Welcome everyone to our Sunday worship together. What a beautiful day God has created just for us.

I am currently in our sanctuary surrounded by your hearts and spirits as we worship together this morning in a different way.

I hope that you are all settling into your temporary living and working situations. I know that we all enjoy time off, working from home, and staying home much better when we get to choose the time and circumstances.

That being said, we remind ourselves that this is temporary and things will get back to normal in the near future.

In the meantime, be kind to yourself and those who share your space during any adjustment period.

Update on church office hours – Dawn and I both will be in the office Thursday 9a – 1p, only. Otherwise, I pop in periodically throughout the week checking on things.

At this time, all church activities and programs are temporarily suspended

Council and I will notify you of any changes as soon as possible.

Please call me if you need to chat, report illnesses, etc.. You can reach me on my cell (717) 521-6469 at any time

For those of you who may not have heard, Sarah Hildebrand passed into the loving presence of our Lord on Thursday, 3/19 at 3a. She had been dealing with cancer. Please hold her son, Tom and his family in your prayers. Any service at this time will be private – family only – due to the current health situation.

Friends, remember that no matter who you are, what you have encountered in the last week, where you have been, or what is to come in the week ahead; for the next 30 min or so, you are home. Let us prepare our hearts and souls for worship.

Opening Words

Magnificent God, who sees all that we can see and everything that we cannot, we gather in awe of your vision that is broad and vast. Be with us now as we worship you. Awaken us to your holiness, inspire us with your creative power, and peel back our layers of anxiety and fear.

Enliven us to trust fully in your love for us as we struggle and strive to be who you call us to be, in Christ's holy name we pray, Amen.

Read Scripture/Message

PSALM 23

When I was in the early days of my seminary journey, I had the chance to chat with my senior pastor down in Coral Gables, Florida about how she chooses what to preach each week. She said, “I hold the newspaper in one hand and the scripture in my other and pray over it for God to mesh the two.” I asked her how that worked in a time of crisis. She said, “the same way. Even on 9/11, God didn’t let me down. The lectionary text for that week gave me what I needed. I didn’t have to pick another text to preach on that week,” she told me.

Needless to say, I was a bit skeptical until this week. As the healthcare crisis has unfolded, and I started to make plans for our 1st week of conference call only worship I turned back to the lectionary as a starting point, fully expecting I would need to search for a text that spoke to me and our current situation. Much to my surprise, when I looked at the box for this Sunday, I saw Psalm 23 printed there. I was pleasantly surprised and thought it was a gift for these times. Let’s listen to the familiar words once again

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.

What do you hear in these words?

How do they make you feel?

Verse 4 speaks to the darkest valley, the valley of the shadow of death as most of us have learned it from the King James Version. Lent is a representation of that dark valley. We don't usually really see the darkness of it until the final week when the tensions build between Jesus and the religious leaders and they finally find a reason to have Jesus arrested. Until that point, we are focused on Jesus' healings and teachings.

In fact, many prefer to avoid the darkest part of the valley of Lent – the shadow of death – in favor of skipping right to Easter. Unfortunately, the darkness is critical to the story. Without it, we would not know the true joy of the resurrection.

This year, the tension is all too real for everyone, and we definitely aren't liking it any better than before. A lot of people are angry and frustrated as they chafe at the restrictions pressed upon the state, even the country by this virus. Many are feeling like they have been imprisoned and are being punished above and beyond – all for something they cannot control. Many are rebelling against the restrictions and trying to keep life "normal" by going out and about as much as possible. But even that is being taken away even more with the new restrictions placed on us Friday morning with the closing of all non-essential businesses.

We take another step into the dark valley. All the while, we are looking for an early exit point, an escape hatch, something that will short circuit this program. Only, to find none. Even the rest stops are closed, so there is no place to pull off and take a breather.... Or so it seems.

I think the biggest reason that this time is such a dark valley that we all are going through is because of the uncertainty attached to it – we don't know how long the shutdowns will last. We don't know who will get sick, or how sick they will get. We don't even know if we have already been exposed. We don't know much of anything other than the virus has been deadly in too many places already around the world and folks are now getting sick in our area.

I once heard someone say on a tv show, "when you are going through hell.....keep going." That is great advice. We often feel like we are stuck in dark valleys, in our own "hells" with no way out. And, of course, we feel that we are stuck there all alone. That there is no one to walk with us through those tough and scary times. Who can blame them? Who wants to hang around when life goes bad for someone else? Very few – because we're all afraid it could be us next.

Here is the best part of Psalm 23, and why it has become known as the ultimate psalm of comfort. In the 2nd half of verse 4, we hear the awesome words.... "for you are with me." Once again in this statement, we hear the promise that God is always with us. And because God is always with us, there is no need to fear what life will bring. There is no need to fear what this virus will do. God will see us through the health scares, the financial issues, and the suspended job situations together. Even more

than that, God has given us each other – this community of faith to walk with us through these scary, uncertain, and even dangerous times.

As Robert Fisher says in his commentary, God unfortunately doesn't wave a hand and remove us from our troubles, but God walks with us, listens to us, and offers us comfort and assurance that we have no need to truly be afraid because all will be well in the end (p106).

We have seen bright spots of compassion and help within the darkness: Some restaurants and schools providing free meals to folks who need them each day – no questions asked. We hear the words of gratitude expressed for the gift of food. Stores creating space for at risk folks – 60+, pre-existing conditions, pregnant women – providing a safer time to come out and shop without the bigger crowds. We heard how one shopper purchased some food for an elderly man who was unable to afford it because he had to buy his regular medications as well. We've heard that folks are answering the call for blood donations – which are at an all-time low right now. We heard how one man continued to visit and even serenade his loved one through the window of her nursing home. Where there is a will, there is a way to stay connected in meaningful ways.

Today, we celebrate and give thanks that we are not alone in our world. That God is always with us, and that we are surrounded by people who truly care for one another.

We are reminded that Jesus' ministry was done out in the world – in the presence of those he encountered during his journey through the countryside. Jesus met the people where they lived, and served them in the needs they had – healing, feeding, offering acceptance, love, and restoring relationships with families, friends and communities.

Just like then, we still are the church no matter whether we are gathered or scattered, whether it is in good times and celebrations or times of trouble and conflict. God is still using our gifts to bless us and our community.

Together, we are the body of Christ – living, loving, and giving. May you walk confidently through the days ahead knowing that God and your faith family are always with you. AMEN

Resources:

Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors. Westminster John Knox Press/Louisville, KY, 2010, p104-109.

Pastoral perspective = Robert W. Fisher

Community Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Prayer requests – who/what would you like to pray for?

Let us pray.....

Loving and Gracious God, we come to you this morning with hearts unsettled. We hear the news and try to trust that all will be well. We go to the stores trying to get supplies even for our regular needs and the shelves are pretty empty. Panic is still circulating in our community. Help to calm our fears. Help to show us the bright spots in the midst of the chaos. We know that there is enough food and supplies to go around for everyone – help us to see the needs of others and share what we have.

Today, we offer to you all those who are continuing to work during these challenging times. Medical personnel and their support staff, first responders, truck drivers, grocery store workers, pharmacy personnel, and other essential businesses. Keep them safe, and keep them as healthy as possible. Bless them and their families as they work to keep our communities “moving” with some normalcy and support in the days ahead.

We ask your blessing upon the homeless and those living at or below the poverty level in our area – those who count on the shelters, food banks, and free meal programs to survive. Let them know that they are not forgotten or alone. Help them find a safe sanctuary where there is shelter from the weather, food and drink to fill their bellies, and comfort for their fears and anxieties.

We offer to you all who fall into the “high-risk” category, especially those who are living alone. Bring comfort and healing to them that only you can offer. Let them know that help will be there when they need it, and that someone is only a phone call away – willing to listen and offer support.

We offer to you all those on our prayer list, those whom we have specifically lifted up to you this morning – you know their needs, and we trust that you are ever with them. We also offer you ourselves. You know what we are struggling with, where we are falling short in our faith, where our fears and anxieties seek to overwhelm us. Give us courage and strength, give wisdom to those of us who need to make decisions that affect others’ lives, and let us all feel your comfort and peace.

With humble hearts, we give you thanks and praise for the numerous and abundant ways that you are present with us and provide for us each and every day. Together we pray the way that you have taught us: Our Father.....daily bread, and forgive us our debts.... debtors. And lead us not into temptation..... AMEN

Benediction

For once you lived as if in darkness, but now in the Lord you live in the light. Live as children of light! Seek that which is good and right and true, and try to live in a way that pleases God. Look to the light of God’s love shown to us in Jesus. Do not hide from it or ignore the struggles of the world, but awaken to God’s call. AMEN

Passing the Peace

See you next Sunday – 3/29!

More emails to follow during the week