

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

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.

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



While I served as a pastor in Michigan, another crisis happened. It may seem rather miniscule in comparison to the national and international scale of the coronavirus, but for those of a once-thriving major city with a massive General Motors plant, it was just as terrifying. Flint, Michigan, that was once synonymous with churning out cars for Americans to drive in, became one-in-the-same with dangerous levels of lead in water. Of course, most of the mental and emotional energy expended in the initial reaction, not just in the state but across the country, was about who was to blame. Some said it was the federal government, some said it was the state, the city of Flint, and others, quite honestly didn't care. It wasn't affecting them where they were, and it was just Flint, after all. "Who really cares about them?" after the

economic downturn of the 1980s put the city into rather harsh times for decades to come. [Yes, we could draw some parallels to our immediate reactions to COVID-19, but that's another subject matter altogether.]

Now, I was serving a more rural congregation on the opposite end of the state. Except, I knew a pastor who was leading (and yes, I mean literally *leading*) a church in the epicenter of this crisis. We both were in internship sites in Dallas, Texas, during our seminary times, but I doubt her education had trained her for what was happening then (not to mention for many of us for what's happening now). So, about two hundred miles away from her, I brought this story up with our youth group. Their initial reaction was, "Well we gotta do something!" kind of mindset. They didn't seem to want to talk about the blame-game so much right there and then. I e-mailed my colleague in Flint, asking what we could do.

Soon enough, we started collecting bottles of water not just for her congregation members, but for the surrounding neighborhood, enough to fill three cars. But the two of us pastors knew it couldn't stop there. We had our youth come along to this Lutheran church in Flint, and not just unload what we brought, but help in collecting water that would be brought to the church that morning, as the church served as a distribution center for those in need. Then, we were shown what the water looked and smelled like from the sink faucet in the bathroom: *disgusting* would be putting it mildly. However, we were, also, shown the sanctuary: the walls of which were absolutely covered in posters and cards sent from all over the country, many of which came from sister congregations that donated funds to help provide this absolutely pivotal ministry to families whose children's lives would be forever altered from impaired cognition to behavioral disorders and hearing issues.

Nevertheless, the most powerful part of the day was having lunch in their fellowship hall with many of the church members and people of the neighborhood. And, somehow, somehow, you could *feel* the hope in spite of what should be the most basic provision of life to be completely unusable. But I doubt the hope came in through bottles water or pieces of paper covering a sanctuary wall; it was the people who joined together, because, well...they didn't have any other choice.

Yes, these current conditions are different now. We can't exactly come together for a meal to share stories of hope, for starters. Except, leave it to the youth to be all about the "We gotta do something!" mindset. Because, up and down the street Sarah and I live on, the children went to the sidewalks in front of their homes, and started putting together such messages of hope (see image above). The steps people take up-and-down the street feel a little lighter with a little more pep than when they first walked out of their house.

The Twenty-third Psalm continues to take on new meaning no matter how many times we hear it. For the people of Flint, the "still waters" will never be thought of the same. Today, it's as if we're being forced to sit and stare at such still waters and not move whatsoever, while, also, feeling as if surrounding waves are crashing down upon us; that we're a little too close for comfort to that "valley of the shadow of death." Quite honestly, we're not so sure where we are, geographically or spiritually-speaking, in this serene Psalm anymore.

Nevertheless, the Psalm has its way of reminding us that regardless of if the waters are still or raging and foaming (Psalm 46), or even in the darkest valley of death itself, this Lord is not going to let us walk alone. And not only that, God is going to empower us to help others take what can be rather scary steps. Granted, we must get creative now, being at a distance. Perhaps, it's sidewalk art. Perhaps, it's leaving groceries at the doorstep, bringing people's trash cans in from a distant driveway end, even a phone call or a text message to convince people that it's still worth getting out of bed in the morning. This relentless love of God is still ready to burst through us. No matter what the surrounding landscape looks like, this unstoppable holy force of God will insist on walking right beside us, even if it's just for a few feet inside our homes or into hectic grocery stores or into our workplaces. Evidently, "goodness and mercy shall follow [us] all the days of [our] life." Not just the non-virus days, *all* the days of this life and into eternity. And for that Greatest News that still remains, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed!

Finally, I leave you with the hymn “Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* Hymn 445), which is often chosen on days when we baptize an infant into the fold of God’s family. However, perhaps, we need a reminder to still remember our own baptism these days: not just in the sense of reminding us that we are still God’s children no matter what, including through these trying times, but out of those baptismal waters, Christ empowered us, and still empowers us into such times as these, too. After all, “With our lives we [still] worship, praise/We your people stand before you,/Water-washed and Spirit-born/By your grace our lives we [still] offer/Re-create us[again]; God, transform[us for this]!

Wash, O God, our sons and daughters
Where your cleansing waters flow
Number them among your people
Bless as Christ blessed long ago
Weave them garments bright and sparkling
Compass them with love and light
Fill, anoint them, send your Spirit
Holy Dove and heart’s Delight

We who bring them long for nurture
By your milk may we be fed
Let us join your feast, partaking
Cup of blessing, living bread
God, renew us, guide our footsteps
Free from sin and all its snares
One with Christ in living, dying
By your Spirit, children, heirs

Oh, how deep your holy wisdom
Unimagined all your ways
To your name be glory, honor
With our lives we worship, praise
We your people stand before you,
Water-washed and Spirit-born
By your grace our lives we offer
Re-create us; God, transform!

["Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters" from Park Street United Methodist Church \(Amarillo, TX\), May 27, 2018](#)