**Psalm 23**

1 The Lord is my shepherd; \*
I shall not be in want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures \*
and leads me beside still waters.

3 He revives my soul \*
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.

4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; \*
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; \*
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.

6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, \*
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

If there was ever a time when we needed to be reminded of the words of the 23rd Psalm, this is the time!

In this disturbing time of Coronavirus and COVID-19, we might often feel lonely, isolated and lost. We need the reassuring presence of the Shepherd’s (well washed) hand to uphold and guide us. “The Lord is my shepherd”. We need to be reminded that we are never alone, no matter how lonely we might feel. “The Lord is my shepherd”.

Our worlds have been turned upside down! For many whose work is where they feel the strongest, the most competent, the most valued, all that has been swept aside by “shelter in place” orders, or schools closed and we are either self-quarantined or simply told to stay home.

We might often have thought dreamily what a bonus a day staying home would be...”Maybe I’ll call in sick today!” But BEING ORDERED TO STAY HOME?!

 “He makes me lie down in green pastures
 and leads me beside still waters”.

What an idyllic picture this paints! But, I’m terrible at relaxing! “Green pastures sounds

pretty good, but I’m pretty much in turmoil with every news bulletin sounding more dire.

I need to still the waters stirring around in my stomach! Breathe in....Breathe out.

The key words here “He....leads me beside still waters” Thank goodness, he doesn’t have to stay six feet away! No need here for “spiritual” distancing.

But still I’m tempted to make a jail- break out of this house, go to be with friends, go to my favorite store or bar. I think, maybe these warnings, these precautions are just scare tactics!.

But then I remember, “He revives my soul,

and guides me along right pathways for his name’s sake.”

I find I am letting go of the thousand thoughts spinning around in my head. Breathe in....Breath out. Stay on track. Stay safe. Keep others safe. Stay on the right pathways!

Easy does it. I feel more like myself again. “He revives my soul.”

I was feeling better and then I turned on the news again! I hear the most recent reports of thousands infected, more being tested (finally!), more likely to be positive, and then we hear, “more than ten thousand dead!”

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”,

We are enshrouded by the “Shadow of Death” and its dark manifestation of a powerful micro organism that we never knew existed until suddenly, “it” or “they” were upon us! COVID-19 !

We ARE walking through the valley of the shadow of death. There is no denying it!

Just listen to the news. Death is an undeniable reality!

But I am not alone! WE are not alone! “For you are with me”,

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”,

I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; Your rod and your staff they comfort me.”

This is the hard part! What I really want is for death not to be real! My death, my spouses death, my children’s deaths, my friends’ deaths. No! No! Not now! Not ever! I do not want to walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Death IS real! But it is not the end! Death does not have the last word. We are not alone, even at that moment we call “death”, And the psalm tells us again, “for you are with me”

“I shall fear no evil; for you are with me”. If death were all there is, if at our dying there was nothing but blackness, then evil would win.

But we have an unfailing advocate, a faithful friend who stays by our side, whose armaments, whose rod and staff comfort us and destroy the power of the enemy. Look carefully at the rod and the staff and the deeper you look, the more you will see the rod and staff shaping into a cross.

“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me.” There is much in this world that longs to bring us down, to distract us from being the person whom God has specially created us to be, but at the end, these distractions will not triumph.”

They will not triumph because we are each specially God’s child and he is specially ours.

As the psalm concludes, “You have anointed my head with oil and my cup is running over”. Just as in today’s Old Testament lesson, David was anointed by Samuel to be king forever and God’s special son, so it is with each of us. In Christ we are God’s child forever!

God has claimed us as his own, and we sing with confidence his promise to us,

in the closing words of Psalm 23,

“Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

We sing this song to ourselves, and to anyone else who will listen, even as the Coronavirus gets more ink and air time and seems to fill all the available emotional space. Even as COVID-19 strikes us down, or those whom we love, we sing this Psalm, for God, not the pandemic, will have the last word.

“Surely your 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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