

"GOD IS WITH US"

By Rev. Victor Kim

Psalm 23

(03-22-20) Lent 4

On Monday of this week, I ventured into our local Costco. It's not something I would have normally done given the circumstances, but I got a call that our canvas print of Jesus, the photo mosaic composed from thousands of small pictures of our congregation, was ready for pick up. I told my wife that I was going, and she said, well if you're going to go, you might as well pick up some chicken. Okay, I said. I went and I dutifully wiped down the handle on the shopping cart and proceeded down to the meat department. I was unprepared for what I saw. There wasn't a single piece of chicken in the entire store. Not a wing, a leg, a breast or a thigh. Not frozen, not fresh, not whole, not a half, nothing barbequed, nothing in the rotisserie, not a chicken in sight. Oh, and there were no eggs either. I wonder which one ran out first! And that's not all. There's usually a wall full of bread, but on that day, nothing, not a single loaf left. Can you multiply loaves if you start with nothing? And no apples either. I expected that there wouldn't be sanitizer or toilet paper, but chicken, bread, apples?

We are living in unprecedented times. Few of us have any experience living in a time when people are told to practice social distancing, when perfectly healthy people are told to stay home, avoid contact with families, friends, loved ones. Many of us can't go to work and too many of us have no jobs to go to because businesses have shut down, closed their doors, some for good. I think that there's a range of emotions running through all of us. We're confused, worried, anxious, we're scared, afraid, fearful. Some of us are frustrated, angry, fed up. But I think that the common thread in all this is that we feel that we have no control over what's happening.

There's a helplessness that's falling over us, like a dark shroud. We don't know how long this will last but each day seems longer than the last. Some say that it could take months, even years, before things return to the way they were, some say that it'll never be the way it was, that this is the new normal. I pray they're wrong.

In the midst of all of this uncertainty, all of this unprecedented, global turmoil, it's easy to forget that we are still in the season of Lent. Three weeks from now will be Easter. Although we have, like most churches, suspended our in-person worship gatherings, it's so important that we continue to worship, that we continue to be connected to each other in community, that we continue to be reminded of who we are as the people of God, those who follow Jesus, his body on earth. And so, even in this time of coronavirus,

we gather to do what the people of God have always done, in times of war, in times of disaster, in times of terror, in times of pandemic, we gather to worship, to praise God and to hear from God's word, from God's Spirit. And though we can't gather in person, we are grateful to be living in a time when our technology allows us to gather and still be community. And when God's people have gathered in times of turmoil, in times when the world seems to be out of control, one of the passages of scripture that has often brought comfort to so many is the 23rd Psalm, which just happens to be one of our readings for this 4th Sunday in Lent.

The 23rd Psalm is one of those scripture passages that even people with no Christian history know, at least part of it. The old King James Version is likely burned into the long term memory of those of a certain age who can recite it by heart. Let me read the KJV for you, if you know it, you can follow along.

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 for ever.**

I like the New Revised Standard Version, from which I read earlier, but when it comes to the 23rd Psalm, somehow nothing seems to surpass the comfort of the older translation. There is also a beautiful sense of lyrical movement within the Psalm. Have you ever noticed the transition in the Psalm between the first half and the second? The first half of the Psalm speaks of 'The Lord' and uses the pronoun 'He.' The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me, he leadeth me, he restoreth my soul. But the second half of the Psalm moves from 'He' language to 'Thou' language. Thou art with me, thy rod and staff comfort me. Thou preparest, Thou annointest. In more modern language 'Thou' means 'You.' So the psalmist moves from speaking about God, about the Lord, speaking of God in a rather distant, formal manner, to speaking to God, as to one who is near and intimate.

Perhaps why this psalm is so compelling is that in these short few verses, the psalmist has managed to capture both the grandeur and majesty of the God of all creation,

the Lord God whom we dare not take for granted or presume too much of, and also the intimate God who knows everything about us, every hair on our head, who knew us as we were being knit together in our mothers' wombs, the Lord God who became one of us and through Jesus, called us friends.

Even more interesting may be the fact that in the original Hebrew, there are exactly 26 words that precede the phrase, Thou art with me, and exactly 26 words that follow. Whether by design or by coincidence, at the very center of all that the psalmist writes is the declaration, Thou art with me. You are with me. God is with me. God is with us. At the very centre of our lives is the declaration, God is with us.

Why is it so important to declare that at the center of our lives is the promise that God is with us? Because, just as the psalmist writes, there are times when we walk through the darkest valleys, or in the KJV, through the valley of the shadow of death.

Part of the power of the psalm comes from the honesty that the psalmist conveys.

The psalmist doesn't live in denial of reality. The psalmist knows that its not a matter of maybe walking through the valley of the shadow of death or possibly walking through life's darkest valleys,

it's the fact that we will walk these valleys. All of us know times in our lives when the paths we walk have become valleys with no seeming end in sight.

I think of the people at the Lynn Valley Care Centre in North Vancouver, where, as of Saturday, 8 people had died of COVID-19, the most of anywhere in Canada. I have prayed for those seniors isolated in that facility and the staff who are looking after them. I have thought about the families with loved ones in the facility and who cannot

visit unless their loved one is on end of life care. I can't imagine what it must be like to be separated in a time of deep concern and worry.

I think about those frontline health care workers who don't have the option of staying home, who are putting themselves at risk with every patient they see. We hear about what's happening in places like Italy where the system is completely overwhelmed and medical staff have to make choices about who they will treat. They face impossible choices due to lack of health resources and some patients who are too old to have a high likelihood of recovery, might have to be left to die. How deep and dark are those valleys?

And our fear isn't limited only to the present situation of the pandemic. I wonder what else we fear? I wonder what our darkest valleys are like? I wonder whether in the midst of the most terrible trouble that life can inflict upon us, that we might be able to proclaim, Thou art with me, you, O God, are with me. It is a confession of faith and trust. It's to be able to say, "I know the reality of trouble in my life, *but* the Lord is my shepherd." "I may be struggling to make ends meet, *but* I will not lack." "I might have trouble sleeping because of everything going on, *but* God causes me to lay down in green pastures." "The storms of life and nature may bring damage to life and limb, *but* God will lead me to still waters." "I might be beaten down and hurt and broken right now, *but* my very being will be restored."

(Geoff McElroy, Desert Scribblings)

Because Thou art with me, because God is with us.

The psalmist recognizes, and the text invites us to recognize as well, that our immediate circumstances are not the end of the story. The psalm reminds us that no

matter what's going on, there's more to this life than the here and now. It is a reminder that it is ultimately God who provides, who nourishes, and who comforts us in our times of trouble, and that this provision goes beyond just the immediate but pursues us "all the days of our lives" and invites us to also dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Perhaps of all the psalms, or of any portion of scripture, the 23rd psalm is the one we most frequently read when we're alone, privately. And maybe we've heard it so many times, so often, that we are in danger of losing or becoming desensitized to its beauty and power. This morning we will have heard the psalm read, at least twice, and Graeme will play music that incorporates the psalm as well. The reason we do so is so that we together as a church community, not only as individuals or small groups, but all of us together, can hear and rely on the assurance of a God who is with us.

And my friends, it is critical that we as a community, that we as God's people, as the church, hear this assurance of God with us together. Just as you and I as individuals might be able to find our strength and hope in the promise of a God who is with us, so also as a church, we have to find our hope and promise in the one who is with us. According to theologian Walter Brueggemann, this isn't just a promise about "the end," however; it says something about how we live our life **today**.

Brueggemann writes:

***"A community that regularly yields its past
to a memory of generous origins in God's good power,
and that regularly yields its future
to the buoyant intentionality of God's promises,
a community that breaks out of amnesia and despair***

will unavoidably live differently in the present."

(Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination)

This "present-tense" trouble the church experiences, Brueggemann says, must **not** throw us off the paths of obedience and trust. God is with us always.

God is with us always.

As we live with the hope of a community who can say together, God is with us, we need to live and share and love as a confident, courageous people who have known the fullness of God's blessings in the past and who will trust in the fullness of God's blessings as we go forward, who will unavoidably live differently in the present.

In a time when people might be tempted to horde because they are frightened by the prospect of scarcity, the people of God must live as a people of abundance. We need to live with generosity toward others, generosity not only of resources, but also of understanding, patience, compassion and mercy. While we must be in solidarity with those around us who are practicing social distancing, we must also be careful not to forsake or forget those who may be experiencing social isolation. In this day or emails and text messages, of Instagram and Facebook posts, or tweets and tic toks, maybe it's a good time rediscover that our phones are called phones because you can actually use them to make phone calls. So, call someone who needs to hear from someone who cares about them. Call someone who needs to hear a human voice, not another email or text message. Let people know you're praying for them, and make sure you actually do, it makes a difference. Some in our congregation are delivering groceries to people who can't get out. Some are available to talk to those who are anxious or feeling especially stressed. We've asked our elders to be in regular contact with their districts, to offer support and connection.

We cannot act from a place of amnesia or despair, either forgetting that God is with us, has been with us, will always be with us, or fearing that God won't or can't do anything about what's going on around us.

Remember, it's Lent, we are on the way to the cross and to Easter. We are on the journey to the empty tomb and resurrection. If we are a people of remembrance and not amnesia, we cannot be a people who will be defeated by despair. In whatever ways you can, in small ways or large ways, make a difference for someone else. Social distancing does not mean social disengagement. This is the time for us to be creative and imaginative. This is the time for us to see opportunity, opportunity to serve, to help, to support, to love. Our focus this Lent is the question, "When they see us, do they see Jesus?"

They will if we live in ways that embody the truth that God is with us, all of us!

Thanks be to God, Amen.

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim.
Preached on 22 March 2020 at Richmond Presbyterian Church
without members in attendance due to COVID-19 Crisis then posted online.*