

“And All Shall Be Well”

Psalm 23

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Lectionary preachers everywhere breathed a deep sigh of relief when we realized that one of the texts for this Sunday is the 23rd Psalm.

This ancient prayer is one of the most well-known, most beautiful, most comforting passages in all of scripture. And what we all need right now is ancient wisdom, beauty, and comfort to make through this global struggle.

Together.

One day at a time.

I didn't grow up in a religious tradition that emphasized the memorization of scripture passages, but somewhere along the way I did finally manage to let this one seep into my soul.

A few years ago I made a home visit for an elderly beloved pet who was near death. As I looked into this sweet pup's eyes and felt his labored breathing, I put my hand on his side and was surprised when the words of the 23rd Psalm tumbled out.

I didn't even know I knew them, but there they were when I needed them.

As we hear today's scripture, I'd like to invite you to read along at home. Maybe you, too, have these words memorized. Or maybe you'd like to let them sink in your soul just a bit more in case you, too, need them one day.

We're going to be reading the King James Version today because the version of the Bible we normally read aloud is under copyright and the good ol' King James isn't! So we've placed the text in the comments if you want to read along with me.

Let's pray this ancient prayer together:

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
4 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.
5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
6 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.

Amen.

The language of this prayer is profound in its simplicity.

One of the things I love most about it is how it invites us on a walk with God. If you close your eyes while you listen to the text you can begin to feel the grass under your feet, hear the birds singing high in the trees, notice the smell of the cool, fresh water beside you as you walk through this prayer.

You can feel the darkness closing in and your heart begins to beat a little faster as you notice the fear and anxiety in your body...and then, again, the slowing of the breath, the unwinding of the tightness in your gut as you hear those words of comfort “for thou art with me.”

The rod and the staff are the shepherd’s tools for guiding and protecting his sheep. We are hemmed in, behind and before, as God’s gentle hand is laid upon our back and our fears are soothed away. [1]

This prayer isn’t just an intellectual exercise. It’s more than just words on a page. It’s a vehicle that transports us to another place. A place beyond the walls that surround us, the ideas that limit us, the confines of time. It is a word of hope that invites us into a space of possibility beyond what we can even imagine.

And, boy, don’t we all need that right now?

I learned this week that in the original Hebrew version of this prayer there are 26 words before and after the central statement: “for thou art with me.” [2]

At the very center of this prayer is that deep truth that is perhaps the cornerstone of our Christian faith: God is with us.

It's what we proclaim on our two highest holy days.

On Christmas we marvel at the miracle of the one we call Emmanuel - which means God is with us. God came to us in human form, in unexpected ways, to be among us and share our human joys and struggles.

On Easter we proclaim that truth again: God is with us even when it seems impossible. In the midst of the atrocities humans commit...violence, pain, hatred - God is with us, still.

And through our stories of Resurrection we proclaim that God is with us beyond death. Even death cannot stop the relentless love of God. Even death cannot separate us from God's presence.

The first half of this psalm is about God: "God is my shepherd....she makes me lie down....she leads me beside still waters." After that central proclamation: "for thou art with me" the language shifts.

Now the psalmist addresses God directly. "YOU prepare a table for me....YOU anoint my head with oil..." The knowledge that God is always with us emboldens our prayers. We are invited into intimacy with the Holy.

We speak to God directly and we expect God to listen and speak to us in return. God is closer to us than the very air we breathe, and we take comfort knowing we can never be separated from God's love. Not now, not ever.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God. [3]

As we all learn to adjust to this new world we've been thrust into, the learning curve is STEEP.

I pray that you are finding ways to be gentle with yourselves and others, extending so much grace. No one is at their best right now and we all need to be patient and kind with one another and ourselves.

There is so much wisdom being offered online right now from mental health professionals, religious leaders, artists and others about how to care for not only our bodies but also our spirits in this crisis. If you've seen social media posts and articles about caring for your mental and spiritual health that have helped you, I encourage you to come back to this post later today and share them in the comments. You never know if that article or photo you share here might really help someone else who is hurting right now.

Many of the articles I've been reading have talked about the importance of making time each day to get outside if you can, unplug from the news, drink water, move our bodies. They also say it's important to carve out at least a few minutes each day for meditation or another spiritual practice...and you know, as your pastor, I AGREE!

I want to close this sermon by sharing with you one small meditative practice I've been using a lot lately to center myself. This is the one I fall back on when I'm in extreme distress, panic mode.

It's never failed me yet.

I use the words of 14th century English mystic Julian of Norwich. Maybe you've heard them before: "And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

We don't know that much about Julian's life but we know she lived through the Black Plague as a child and war and many other times of trial. When she was about 30 years old she became gravely ill and as a priest was administering her last rites, she was gifted with a series of 16 visions of Christ, which she later wrote down as the *Revelations of Divine Love*.

So when I'm feeling panicked or can't sleep or can't find the words for my prayers, I do this: I use her words as a mantra. And I sync them up with my breathing.

Sometimes I also use my mind to envision a physical activity that comforts me. For me, that's doing half -sun-salutations in my mind. For you, though, it might be something like envisioning yourself walking along your favorite path - linking up your breath and Julian's words with each step you take. Or perhaps you are chopping vegetables in your mind, or quilting, or pedaling your feet on a bicycle, or dancing. Linking your breath with movement of your body and Julian's words can transport you to a place of calm, a place of unity with God.

So let's try it together. I'm going to use this Hoberman sphere to show what your breath might look like while I say the words.

When the sphere gets big, we will all breathe in, filling our lungs together.

When the sphere gets small, we will breathe out, emptying our lungs.

And all shall be well

And all shall be well

And all manner of things shall be well.

Friends, I believe these words to be true. For God is with us. We are not alone. And all shall be well.

NOTES:

[1] Psalm 139

[2] James Howell. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4385

[3] United Church of Canada, A New Creed.

<https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/new-creed>