



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 22, 2020

1 SAMUEL 16:1–13; PSALM 23; EPHESIANS 5:8–14; JOHN 9:1–41

WE PACK FOR OUR FEARS

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. Psalm 23. Perhaps one of the most revered and well known passages of Scripture. And for those who feel I simply selected it today, most of you know, I don't get to pick. These scriptures we have for today are the ones given for today, and this one is a bit haunting, in this our pandemic Lent.

At the moment, we can all relate a bit more than usual, perhaps,walking through the valley of the shadow of death. It, death, may not catch us all this time, in fact, most will recover we are told, but make no mistake, no matter the outcome, this time, or the next, we are all in that valley, together.

Which may be the most important thing to take note of today, to heed, no matter your age, or preexisting conditions, or any of that. As it has been said, none of us are getting out of this alive, this earthly life that is. It may not come now, but it will come.

We are all walking through the valley of the shadow of death. And in truth, we always are.

Some of you know I go backpacking on a somewhat regular basis with about a dozen clergy I really like, Because, if you are going to backpack and live with people for 5 nights on the trail, you better like them.

On the first trip we took together, through the Cascades, it became apparent, as it so often does, about 48 hours in, just all the extra, unneeded stuff we had brought along, and that each and every one of us had at least one thing that we simply, irrationally, overpacked. As we talked one of the wise clergy blurted out. "We pack for our fears." We pack for our fears. That line has stayed with me ever since.

I think it might have been in this very pulpit, but wherever it was, I have definitely preached on that line before. And in these last few weeks it has been coming back to me more and more. We pack for our fears. On that first trip, one of

our clergy, I kid you not, brought along a full size umbrella, not a fold up kind, not a lightweight one really, but full size, always right there, attached to the outside of his pack. His greatest fear, being wet. And yet, as fortune would have it, and even though the week before we left, the Cascades saw a snowstorm not realized in many years, and even though it should have rained, and snowed, the week we hiked, not a drop fell from the sky. But he had that umbrella.

I packed way too much food, because that is my greatest fear, and yet, any of you that know me, and thank God for the distance on this livestream, because you probably can't see, but if you could, I think we would all agree I could afford to miss a few meals.

Some feared not having enough clothes, and brought way too many. The list goes on and on. We packed, most of us, more than we needed, we packed for our fears.

I couldn't help but think of this as I saw the notification roll across my Zoom saturated screen this week. The headlines read "\$10 for a roll of toilet paper." I opened up the Associated Press article which started with these words and I quote:

One store advertised hand sanitizer at \$60 a bottle. Another was accused of hawking it at \$1 a squirt. Chain stores offered \$26 thermometers and face masks at the "everyday low price" of \$39.95 a pair, while a convenience store touted toilet paper at \$10 a roll next to a sign reading: "This is not a joke."'¹

And indeed it is not. This is not a joke. Some of these stores were run by the same corporate mogels that stood with our President a few days

ago posing as "answers to our problems". We humans can be a very strange lot indeed.

It will have to come at a later time, and I am not going to explore it much more here today, but what is it about our backsides that are so important? The absolute hoarding of toilet paper, or just about anything. What does this say about us?

And so I came back to that line. We pack for our fears. We also hoard for our fears. And yet, Scripture tells us, we, especially we followers of Jesus Christ, are not to fear. Psalm 23 says it, I shall fear no evil, and the admonition, "Be not afraid," may be the most repeated commandment in the New Testament, almost always spoken by Jesus himself.

And yet we are fearful. I will admit I am. Fear has a good side. It can make us pay attention and really a lot more need to start paying attention. Fear is real, and human, and we will have it, but it really, should not be what drives us, it is not what we worship, and we certainly profess not to be people of fear. It is times like these that test that.

We will have fears, but the real question is what will drive us.

When you go back to Psalm 23 it is interesting to note that the Hebrew original was better translated "I shall lack nothing." Or "I shall lack no good thing."² And I wish we would heed that distinction today. I shall not be in want, is hard to attain. We all do want things, and quite frankly, we all do need things. But, it is indeed a bit different to say, I shall lack nothing.

I feel we are going to get a good look at the difference in these days and that might not be a bad thing at all.

This very thing we do today here. None of us want to do it this way, but it is also not the end of the world, that we have to do it this way.

We are isolated, but we are not alone. We are still walking, through that valley, together. Yes, 6 feet apart, and not nearly as often, and having to suffice with voice and video most of the time, but we are all still connected.

Our Episcopal Chaplains, in our hospitals, told me this week that it is like nothing they have ever seen, and no one they work with has ever seen. They said, if you could see what we are seeing, and you could be in the meetings we are having in which we are discussing the difficult decisions we may have to make in the weeks ahead, you would stay home, you would heed everything being asked of you. Please do it.

None of those on the front lines are retreating. I am sure they are fearful, and well they should be, but that is not what drives them. They are not retreating because of fear. Instead, they are walking right into it, for us, and they are begging us, to not out of fear, but for the good of all, for them, for those who are fighting for life, or soon will be, to simply stay in, stay home, keep your loving distance. That is the call on us right now. That is what it is to walk, together, in the Valley right now.

And even in isolation and separation, I urge you to be connected with those heroes, the health care workers, the first responders, those who are growing our food, and delivering it, those that can't hunker down, but instead, are being asked, on our behalf, to be right on the front lines. Meditate on them every day. Get one in your mind and just think and pray on them. Walk with them, every day, in your heart, and mind, and in your prayers. They do what they do to protect us, and we should, in

turn do what we are being asked to help and protect them.

In Psalm 23, it is interesting to note, what one commentator did, that in the original Hebrew, there are exactly twenty six words before and after that line, "Thou art with me." Perhaps the Psalmist was making a point that God is always right in the middle of it all no matter what "it" is.³

I believe that to be true. I stake my life on it. We are walking through the Valley, all of us, together. And right in the midst of all of it, is our God.

My fellow followers. God is right here, even if we all can't be. God is right with you, God is with everyone suffering with this, and even with those selfishly ignoring all of this.

You and I may not get to share communion right now, but in God, we are in communion. Even separated we are communion.

Maybe you can look at it this way. We have been blessed in our lives to be able to come to spaces like this, and to share at this table. When we are here, we often give lip service to the fact that the real work is out there. Well now, we are, out there, living it out, unable to come back here, for now. But that is OK.

Coming here was and will be again a great blessing, and now we might even say a luxury, we will certainly relish it when we can be here again, but no space, no symbol, no ritual, no manual act done perfectly, or not done at all, no theology or ecclesiology will ever make us be loved one bit more, or less by God. Wherever we are, together, or separate, surrounding this table, or surrounding the world, God is in the midst of us, loving us.

We are supposed to be the people that know that, that believe that, that live that. That is what we are being called to in these days.

This week I was sent by two different people, Franz Wright's poem, "The Hawk" from his book "God's Silence" He addresses this poem to his fellow monsters, which happens to be us. He ends the poem with these lines.

*"Fellow monsters, while we are still here, for one minute, think about this: there is someone right now who is looking to you, not God, for whatever love still exists."*⁴

I would not call us monsters, and I don't know all that is behind this poem, but I do very much believe what the poet asks us to think about, that someone is looking to us, not God, for whatever love still exists.

To love now is to stay at home, to not be in contact, to give up some of what we enjoy, to sacrifice. Love now is to, especially if we have not lost our incomes, to give so that others can live, to share so that others might thrive, to love

so that others might know love still exists. Let the world see, even if we can't gather here, what it is we always profess when we are here, that we are not driven by fear, that it is Love that drives us, directs us, guides us.

Carry with you, these words.

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

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

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

*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.*

*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.*

*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. Amen.*⁵

¹ Associated Press News, "\$10 toilet paper? Coronavirus Gouging Complaints surge in US." Reese Dunklin and Justin Pritchard, (Internet, March 19, 2020)

² James Howell, Senior Pastor, Myers Park United Methodist Church, Charlotte, N.C., *Commentary on Psalm 23* (Working Preacher, March 22, 2020,)

³ James Lindberg, *Psalms*, (Westminster, John Knox Press, 2000)

⁴ Franz Wright, *God's Silence: Poems* (Knopf. 2006)

⁵ Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved