

Don't Be Afraid – Lent IV

Good Morning Everyone;

This will be different from my usual sermon, in that I'm focusing only on the Psalm.

I encourage you to have a cup of tea or coffee while we worship together.
And if you have a favourite candle, to light it as we worship together.

I think it would be safe to say that the 23rd Psalm is one of the best-known psalms.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to the Psalms as the Prayer Book of the Bible. The Psalms have also been referred to as the Hymn Book of the Bible. They contain some of the oldest writings in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Twenty-third Psalm...

The Divine Shepherd
A Psalm of David.

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.

This is a psalm of comfort, of protection. It is a psalm of identity...God calls us to be in relationship. Even in times of fear, doubt and despair God is always there.

Anybody feeling any despair as of late? Many of my friends are extroverts and they are struggling mightily without their gatherings of friends and constant social contact.

As a strong Introvert, isolation, for me, is a kind of dream. An open space, on my own, to do as I please, when I please.

My home has always been a sanctuary, a place of quiet, of calm and of peace. Yet since the COVID-19 virus made its way to Canada there's been a barrage of information.

I feel as though I'm constantly connected to the news, Facebook, Instagram and the telephone. Working with two different denominations has been quite challenging and yet I'm learning a great deal; about each organization, their polity and myself.

Even though we are called to social isolation, I'm feeling almost overwhelmed with the amount of connection and conversation I've been having this week. Text, email, phone calls, Zoom meetings it goes on and on and on.

Decisions need to be made about shuttering Churches. They were made. Communicating information to our Parishioners. This remains ongoing. Contacting folks who live alone, are ill, or otherwise shut in. This, too, is ongoing. Even though we are not gathering in person, we are still, very much, the Church.

The challenge is that right now there is a lot of panic, a lot of information flying around that may or may not be accurate. My heart goes out to Dr. Bonnie Henry, B.C.'s Provincial Health Officer. She provides daily updates, which then get dissected in the media. The amount of information out there right now is downright overwhelming. And I've found if I spend too much time online I start to feel anxious and afraid.

It is important to remain in touch with each other. It is important to support each other. To that end, on the Facebook page for the Church I am posting Five Things every day to help us walk through this time of social isolation while remaining engaged and focused.

Today's list of Three Things...

Breathe – deep cleansing breaths, slow your heart rate, clear your mind.

Wash your hands, often. Before you leave the house, once you return. Every time you touch your face or any surface. Remember, the stores have LOTS of soap, there's no fear there will be a shortage.

Pray for yourself. Share your hopes and fears with God. This is a difficult time. It's okay to lay it all at God's feet. God is here for us. Always.

Clean out your linen cupboard. If you have sheets and towels that have seen better days consider donating them to the SPCA. Match up your sheet sets, fold them and put them inside one of the pillow cases. Makes changing bedding much easier when everything is together.

Mindfully make a cup of tea. Choose your favourite mug. Choose your favourite tea. Pay close attention as the water boils/coffee brews. Inhale deeply. Pour. Add condiments (if necessary). Hold the mug in your hands. Inhale deeply. Sip carefully. Savour...

This is a time for us to be kind with everyone we encounter. Especially medical staff, grocery store clerks, pharmacists and their assistants. Drive Thru workers. They are putting their own health at risk to ensure we stay healthy, fed and medicated.

This pandemic didn't begin overnight and won't end overnight. It will take time, patience, perseverance and common sense. We must follow the instruction of the health authorities; keeping social distance. Not gathering in groups. Monitoring our own health and that of our loved ones. If we are sick, DO NOT go out.

Drink lots of water. Sit in the sunshine. Go for walks, and keep your distance. Cook and eat good food, comforting food. Eat the cookie. Watch movies. Play games. Light candles. Say prayers. Laugh. Cry. Connect. Nap.

I'd like to share with you another version of the 23rd Psalm. This is from Leslie Brandt.

The Lord is my constant companion.

There is no need that He cannot fulfill.

Whether His course for me points to the mountaintops of glorious joy
or to the valleys of human suffering.

He is by my side.

He is every present with me.

He is close beside me when I tread the dark streets of danger,
and even when I flit with death itself,

He will not leave me.

When the pain is severe,
He is near to comfort.

When the burden is heavy,
He is there to lean upon.

When depression darkens my soul,
He touches me with eternal joy.

When I feel empty and alone,
He fills the aching vacuum with His power.

My security is in His promise to be near me always
and in the knowledge that He will never let me go.

You have heard me say for a long time that Church is more than a building. It is the people who come together for worship, for fellowship, to bless each other and our God.

There is a great debate raging right now about whether we should be offering services online or through email. Do we provide hard-copies of sermons for those who don't have access to technology? If we do decide to provide service online, should the Minister be at home or at the Church?

And there's no easy answer. There's no singular right answer.

I encourage you to do what is best for you. To be steadfast and hopeful. To be kind.

We have been asked to light a candle and place it in our windows. To provide hope in the darkness. To remind us that we are not alone. I encourage you, as you are able, to do this.

One of my favourite paraphrases of the Bible is from Eugene Peterson who took the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament and paraphrased them into [The Message](#). Here is his take on the 23rd Psalm.

O God, my shepherd!
I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows;
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word, you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through Death Valley
I'm not afraid, when you walk by my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.

In this life and in the next we are assured of God's love for us. The image of shepherd does not read the same in the 21st century as it did in the 1st century. And yet when we think of shepherd we think of protector...

I believe it is said that sheep know their shepherd's voice and respond to it. If that is so, and we are God's sheep, we should respond when God calls on us.

Those of us with strength should help those who are weaker.
Those of us with means should help those who are without means.
Those of us with lots of love should share with those who are lonely.
In short, as God's flock we must work together. Even though we cannot touch each other physically we can reach out through the telephone, text, email and even snail mail, just to say "you are loved and important to me".

If you know someone who is struggling right now, reach out. If they would benefit from a phone call from someone on the Pastoral Care team or from me, please let us know.

I continue to hold you all in prayer as we navigate this uncertain time. Please know that you are loved by God. More today than yesterday, yet not as much as you'll be loved tomorrow. Of that you have my promise and God's word.

Let all God's children say Amen.

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Pastor Priest and Prophet
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Resources:

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich [Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible](#) (c) 1970 Augsburg Fortress

Brandt, Leslie F. [Psalms Now](#) (c) 2003 Concordia Publishing House

Easton, John [Meditating on the Psalms](#) (c) 2004 Continuum Publishing

Lucado, Max [Safe in the Shepherd's Arms: Hope and Encouragement from Psalm 23](#)

(c) 2002 J. Countryman, A Division of Thomas Nelson Inc.

Peterson, Eugene [The Message](#) (2006) NavPress