

Twilight & Shadow
4th Sunday of Lent
March 22, 2020
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

Psalm 23 (Pastor Lucus' translation)
Adonai is Shepherd to me

Nothing will I lack.

In a pasture of grass newly freshened with rain,

Adonai tells me to graze.

By the waters of tranquility,

Adonai carefully guides me.

My breath,

Adonai brings back

Adonai leads me in the worn paths of what is right
to remember the Holy Name.

Yet, though I walk in the Valley of Darkness, I will not be afraid of evil-doers -
Because you are with me.

Your shepherd's crook and walking stick give me comfort

You prepare, in front of me, a smorgasbord
directly opposite my rivals

You cleanse me with oil on my head.

My drinking-cup overflows!

Indeed, goodness and grace will pursue me every day of my life

and I will return to the home of Adonai as long as I live.

[Ephesians 5:8-14 \(CEB\)](#)

Six years ago today, Elana and I were married. We wrote our own vows in secret, sharing them only with an artistic friend who made an amazing wall hanging reminder of our vows. Though we kept the vows secret from each other, it was when we first shared them with each other, when they first were made public, that we remember as the important moment. In our vows, and in the sermon

delivered that day, we heard over and over again that there are times that love will support marriage – and times when marriage will support love. We heard many reactions to our wedding service, but over and over again, people said that they felt comforted and healed by the way that love was celebrated and God was lifted up. It felt like that day was a focal point for the light of God, a moment in time that was meaningful not just to us, but to all who had gathered to celebrate love.

But just as there are times that feel like all the light, all the love of God, is focused right then and there – there are times that feel like darkness and shadow, too. When it's a struggle to feel God's presence. When fear and anxiety push themselves in front of the divine light, and seem to eclipse it. When Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, "Live your life as children of the Light!", he wasn't speaking into a time of light – but a time of darkness. It is difficult to live as a child of the Light when you're forced into isolation, when your whole world changes suddenly. When the world pushes us ever darker, merely staying dimly illumined can feel incredibly difficult. Yet, Paul pushes back against this:

"Light produces fruit that consists of every sort of goodness, justice, and truth... and everything exposed to the light is revealed by the light." Even a small flame, like that of a tealight, is enough to push back the darkness. Honor the light you see in others, even through the internet, even as we practice social distancing – and know that even your dimmest spark of light is visible, too. Weirdly, this dim spark of light is visible in an eclipse, too – when the sun peaks around the edges of the moon, it is called the "corona" of light. A corona of hope in dark times, as opposed to the corona of fear we are experiencing now. May you turn from fear to hope in these times of quarantine and darkness..

Lots of the Bible is written to be read in difficult times, in times of darkness. Psalm 23, perhaps the most famous psalm, is certainly one of them. It is a trust-psalm, and like all trust-psalms, it hinges on a promise from God. No matter what, Psalm 23 reminds us, God is with you. Indeed, in the traditional King James Version, the phrase "for Thou art with me" stands at the middle, with "Thou" – meaning God – preceded and followed by an equal number of words. It is the

turning point in the psalm.

In the first half, the images are of comfort and safety, reminding us to trust in God. A brief note: I like to use Adonai rather than “the Lord” to translate the divine name. It is a Hebrew word that means “my Lord” – but using it in the same way that we’d use a name helps to remind us that the text uses the divine name for God in this place – a name so holy that I prefer not to say it out loud.

The psalmist begins: Adonai is shepherd to me – recognizing that God acts as a caretaker, as a preserver of human life just as a shepherd does for sheep. It’s comforting to think of God as a caretaker – and since this psalm is attributed to David, who worked as a shepherd, it has a bit of “God is like me, but greater.” After all, Adonai tells me to graze in a pasture newly freshened with rain – the best grass, the sweetest grass. And beside still waters – even when the wind drops to nothing and the stillness threatens to overcome, God leads us, calling our names, showing us the way to go. Even though the path of what is right is worn from constant travel, Adonai leads me down it, and helps me remember to call out to God’s holy name.

After beginning in comfort, the psalm turns to where you are. Recognizing the darkness, but that God is present even there. After all, a shepherd’s crook and a walking stick are used to guide and protect. We fear no evil, because God’s will defend us and guide us.

Now, the end of Psalm 23 is about taking action, restoring faith in yourself so that you can act again. First, God prepares a smorgasbord, a table heavy-laden with food and drink for us. And not just for us, but for our rivals, our enemies, too. And there’s enough food for everyone – and space between, as well, knowing that enmity is not easily overcome. Yet, eating together is a way of healing and forgiveness. Once this time of isolation ends, watch how it feels to eat with friends and family again. Then picture eating with people you don’t trust – and feeling that same sense of relief.

“You cleanse me with oil on my head” – anointing was a way of showing favor, and of asking God’s healing. The psalmist reminds us that God’s favor doesn’t

leave us, even in the midst of darkness. “My drinking-cup overflows” – traditionally, this drinking-cup would have been filled with wine or beer, as it is a celebratory time – that’s what “overflowing” means. Yet, it also tells us that God keeps us safe even when our senses are dulled.

Finally, we read, “God’s Goodness and Grace pursue me...” Goodness and grace aren’t there for us to take, aren’t things we make ourselves – but are provided by God to our world on our behalf. Sometimes, we need to take time to look for them, to be reminded of how Goodness and Grace act in surprising ways. For times of change, it is a good reminder that the one who guides us, who provides grace, who provides goodness, is also the one who provides us shelter – “I shall return to the home of Adonai.”

You see, my friends, whether we are in focused light of a wedding, the twilight of a dim candle, or the valley of the shadow of death, God is there. At all times in your life, you can call to God, and God will be there. Even as we isolate ourselves from each other, God offers us comfort and presence – and through God’s presence, we can dimly sense each other, too. It is a comfort to know that, even if I can’t see you in person, God links us together. When I sit at my table, and you sit at yours, though we yearn to be sitting at the same table at the same time, we trust that we are, in fact, both seated at God’s table. And what a joy it will be to reunite once these days of isolation, of quarantine, of distancing are at an end.

May you see God’s light in the world. May you feel the Spirit of God connecting you with the lights of those around you, even at a distance. When you’re at the edge of light and shadow, may you turn towards Christ’s light, and find your way back. In the name of Adonai the Shepherd, Christ the Table and Cup, and the Light of the Holy Spirit, amen!