

Lent IV ~ Year A, March 22, 2020 ~ Psalm 23
The Reverend Canon Catherine Ascah, St. John the Evangelist, Smiths Falls
Suspension of Public Worship due to Pandemic: Week 2

I have, as have many of you I suppose, been a bit fixated on social media platforms this past week. Part of it is out of necessity: trying to stay connected; trying to stay up to date on the latest protocols and directives and official news releases; but then sometimes I found myself being sucked into the social media vortex which isn't at all helpful. As I mentioned earlier in one of my announcements, practicing good social media hygiene these days is every bit as essential to your mental health as practicing good hand hygiene is to your physical health.

All that said, I received a remarkable gift this week when a colleague of mine shared a FB post by The Rev'd Norm Wesley. Some of you may recall he was our guest at Synod a few years ago. He is the priest of St. Thomas' church in Moosonee. In his post, Norm was reciting the 23rd Psalm in Moose-Cree. His gentle voice rises and falls over the syllables, and while the language is completely unfamiliar to me, I was somehow able, through the rhythm and cadence of his voice, to follow along.

Now, I will confess. And I think it might be a heresy, what I am about to admit, but in this season, everything is on the table, right? The 23rd psalm isn't my favourite. In fact, I rarely turn to it when I am seeking solace. Psalms 139 and 42 are my "go-to" Psalms. But this week, in the midst of the information frenzy; the latent, barely-below-the-surface anxiety that thrums through the atmosphere like some sea mist swirling in to enshroud a coastline, Norm's voice, reciting that psalm, brought a soothing peace that was more welcome than any other balm out there.

When you find yourself in difficult times, with darkness drawing near, your close friends may in the past come to you and try to lift your spirits.

"Cheer up!" they may have suggested. (Few are saying that these days).

"Look at the bright side," others may have offered. (Few are saying that either.)

There is, when confronted with darkness, this wish to abolish the darkness.

The good shepherd of Psalm 23 takes a different approach. In Psalm 23, the shepherd walks with us in the midst of the darkness, the midst of the trials. The darkness isn't abolished, but we are changed when we receive the gift that is his presence.

In this remarkable Lenten season, which has taken on a whole new meaning for us – a whole new meaning of being church in the wilderness, church in the dark even – when we are feeling like never before the call to penitence and greater faith, we are given the gift of Psalm 23, this psalm of sustenance and encouragement as we progress along the dark path that leads to Easter. And rest assured, we will get to Easter.

While we are called to attend to our sinfulness, and the sinfulness of the world; while we are confronted in a very visceral way with our mortality, we are offered an outstretched hand from the One who will walk with us and give us comfort and courage. We are offered the outstretched hand of the One who will fill our cup; prepare our table in the face of our fears, surround us with goodness and mercy, and even call that goodness and mercy out of us and lead us to share it.

I commend to you as you journey in this unfamiliar season, the Psalms. All of them. They speak to and about the very reality of our lives. Some are comforting. Some are frightening, because they speak about our true feelings and fears and anger. Some are challenging. But they are all very real.

In this season where physical presence between us is an even scarcer commodity than it has been in the past, we have been given the gift of presence in Psalm 23 today. The abundance of God's care, and the palpable presence of God are poured out in these timeless, familiar words. And in this unfamiliar season, perhaps we can hear them anew, feel them anew, and share them anew.