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Grace and Holy Trinity Church
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This morning we sang Hymn #664, My shepherd will supply my need, which is a beautiful paraphrase of the well known 23rd Psalm which reads:

1 The Lord is my shepherd; *

I shall not be in want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *

and leads me beside still waters.

3 He revives my soul *

and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.

4 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.

5 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.

6 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.

Today I am going to take some time to look at what seems like an all too familiar 23rd Psalm. It is customary to use because it is commonly the Psalm used for funerals. Even if you have never been to a funeral, if you've ever seen a funeral portrayed in a film or television show, the chances are that the presider recited at least a portion of this Psalm.

Why not, after all, It is a pastoral psalm and full of beautiful, images of lying down beside still waters, and resting in the eternal love of God. Who wouldn't want that kind of comfort shared with those who love you when they gather to celebrate your life and your reunification with God. My understanding of this beloved Psalm changed drastically when my CPE supervisor, Sister Maureen Mitchell, cautioned that as chaplains at the VA we ought to never enter the room of a patient with the expectation of reading Psalm 23 and calling it a day.

She explained how Psalm 23 is a response to Psalm 22. And in Psalm 22 (which we recite during our Good Friday Liturgy), we hear the absolute heartbreak and suffering which precedes the comforting embrace of God. If you want to read Psalm 23, then you better first read Psalm 22.

I am not going to read that to you today, but I am going to invite you to delve into your own experience, to think about a time when you sought out comfort. Maybe that time is today- perhaps isolation, anxiety, depression, addiction, or other disordered living has been taking their tolls on your health or well being during this time of social distancing. Maybe that time was last week or the week before, or a long time ago. Perhaps that time has yet to come into your life. If that's the case, God bless you and keep this thought in your head for future use, because suffering is part of the human experience.

That is not to say that pain is comparable- because what one person handle's all in a day's work can be the destruction of another, and we are not in a whose the biggest martyr competition amongst ourselves. Instead, we bear one another burdens and hold one another's griefs. No matter the root of that suffering, we are in this life together. It is easy to forget that as so many people have said recently, we are all just doing the best we can in this situation.

For those of us who follow Christ, who think of ourselves as the chosen people, it is difficult to remember that we are not the shepherd. We aren't even necessarily the sheep that need rescue; we aren't always the sheep that needed to be comforted and held atop Jesus' broad shoulders. Sometimes we are the sheep who seem to have been left behind, the sheep left in the fold to fend for themselves while the shepherd does the work of finding the lost one.

The 23rd Psalm is not comforting in that way Hollywood portrays it to be. Some serene peaceful scene that we have gained access to because we are good and righteous and perfect. The 23rd Psalm provides us with a perspective that after the destruction of our lives. After the pots break and our mouths dry out like ash, there is a space to still a glimpse growth; there is an opportunity for renewal, there is time to come into a right relationship with God, with one another and with one's self. Rather than being perfect, having never experienced hardship, illness, suffering, or loss, the Good Shepherd brings us through those moments. Like this suffering, we are currently experiencing as a worldwide human family. Moments when we are longing for something better, something different, something less alien, something that is less different than we expected.

Different than what we expected, isn't that the way that God often works? We want what we want when we want it, and how we want. What we want, what we expect, what we know, what we think is reasonable. We want - and yet when we are in the company of the good shepherd, we are not in want. Desire is the epitome of what we know to be true, which is entirely different from what we have experienced in this world.

So, where are you in want my beloved siblings? How can you recognize that Christ is providing for you even in this time of separation? How can we remember that at all times and in all places, care is available to us? Where are you caring for others? How are you caring for yourself? Where are you getting a glimpse of the Holy Rest that God has promised?

Remember, you are not alone - you are never alone. You are in the care of one another and in the care of the Good Shepherd.

Amen