

August 30, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 19 Psalm 23

Dearly Beloved;

This morning I am sharing with you that the Session of St. Andrew's met on Thursday evening and made a decision regarding opening for Public Worship. If a number of criteria are met, we will meet in the sanctuary on the 20th of September at 10:30 a.m. I would remind us all that the rules we need to follow are not set by us. They are the rules set by our Provincial Government with the advice of Public Health. We will be asking you to keep a distance (6 meters) from anyone you are not living with at home. There will be hand sanitizer available. Use it please. Sit in the designated areas, and please co-operate with the elders who will be attempting to shepherd us into place and out of the building. Masks are to be worn inside the church. If you do not have one, or forget it, one will be provided. The critical criteria we have adopted are: this decision is dependent on there being no active cases of Covid-19 in our County. The Sanctuary can get hot even in September. The temperature will have to be below 75 degrees (F) or 24 (C). I cannot underline sufficiently that Public Health guidelines must be followed. We will be recording attendance, in order to accommodate the possibility of having tracing information. Do not attend if you are not feeling well or are running a temperature. I have often led worship with a cold, or an infection of another type. I will not be able to do so under these conditions. If I am ill, I will not be present. There will be no bulletins, no hymn books, praise information in the pews.

Nor will there be copies of the sermon. We are going to be doing everything possible to make sure you do not touch contaminated surfaces or that you do not contaminate surfaces around you. The Offering will be placed in a plate as you arrive or as you depart. We will be dismissing by rows under my direction. Because inside spaces are more dangerous than outside spaces, you will be continually reminded to put 6 feet, between yourself and the person in front of you. Enter on Mill Street. Exiting will be by a different door as directed at the time. For a time, there will be music but we will not be singing. If there is a second wave of the pandemic we will follow the directions of our Government and Public Health Ontario. You do not have to “remember” all of this...but it will be necessary that you follow direction. If you are not comfortable about attending, do not attend. Your support of St. Andrew’s and her budget to this point in time is an expression of your faith, and it has been impressive. Discomfort is not what we wish to create. Services will be shorter than an hour, in part because we will not be singing. Also it is my commitment to get you back outside, into an air space that is safer as quickly as I can. Our hope is that by waiting until the 20th we will be beyond the season where the sanctuary heats up to an unsafe degree. God bless you. I look forward to seeing you once again in our home space at St. Andrew’s.

Psalm 23 is a classic. Most of us have memorized the words. In my case, that has become the result, not of an assignment in memory work, but from reading it in worship, at funerals, and in my own devotions. It is a classic, because it

opens with a phrase that defines who God is and who we are in relation to HIM. "The Lord is my shepherd." Sheep need a caretaker. There is no caretaker like the Lord God Almighty. Jesus defined HIMSELF during his time of ministry on earth as the "good shepherd." HE knew what HE was saying and claiming when he did so. When Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd," HE was claiming to be the Son of God, divine and yet of flesh and blood like us. HE was declaring that HE would do what a shepherd does, caring for the flock in every way they and we need to be cared for. He was making it plain that the cross which HE would embrace was not something Rome would impose upon HIM, but rather something HE came to do to redeem us. HIS sense of being the hand of God strong to save was in that claim which is also a promise.

When I say the Lord is my shepherd, it defines who I am and to whom I belong. I am (as you are) a disciple of Jesus. We have become accustomed to calling ourselves Christians. That is really an interesting concept, because as you know the word Christian was only used in the Biblical records by those who wanted to arrest people like us, put them on trial, and if possible eliminate them. We are followers of Jesus who is the Christ. Not was. HE is. HE is alive and in our lives, the Lord whom we serve and whom we look to see again when HE returns to fulfill the Kingdom promises.

It defines who we are when we say "the Lord is my shepherd." We are members of the flock, the faithful, the fellowship...the church. I have continually said that one of the

hardest things I have experienced in my life, is the fact that in the midst of the Covid-19 plague, we could not gather together. We have missed one another. Yes, we have missed the hugs, but it is so much more than that. For the better part of nine and a half years you and I have been plugging away at walking in the footsteps of Jesus, together. I remember when I was in Israel the first time. Each night, having been travelling in Galilee and walking the sites where Jesus walked, I would send you a letter. There were nights when we just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep because we had walked somewhere around 6 miles. I wrote you because part of my going was to learn and share with you the insights of that Holy land. And when I returned I couldn't stop talking about the places I'd been and the things I had seen and heard. I had witnessed so much of the Biblical word in the places where it was read and spoken, and where those who wrote it down were inspired to do so by what they saw and heard. We are bound together by the common bond of the Lord's being our shepherd. In so many ways, the Church is nothing if she loses sight of that one real and solid truth.

David's claim in professing his faith in these terms, his relationship to the Lord, is "I shall not be in want." It is a miraculous claim. If we are following the good shepherd, if HE is the Lord of our lives, we have everything we need. Life clicks into focus. We know what to do, and we have what we need. This simple (which does not mean it is easy, in fact it can be very hard, difficult) profession of faith reveals how we should live, and even how we should die. My joints remind me that I

am closer to the finish line than I have ever been in this race. And yet, the end is not the end. Absent from the body, present with the Lord. We can handle this, because the Lord is our shepherd.

Verse 2 of the 23rd Psalm reminds us of simple pleasures. “He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.” In the midst of the Covid-19 plague we have all been reminded of how fragile life is. A virus, so small it can’t be seen with the naked eye has taken the lives of nine and a half thousand Canadians. In the midst of the plague how many more have died from shootings and stabbings and car crashes that happened at speeds which no one should drive at, in the wee hours of the morning. The Lord leads us to lie down on green grass, to lakes and streams where the water is quiet, where it slakes thirst and gives us peace. In those moments we get what we “really need.” The restoring of our souls. It says in Genesis 2:7 “God formed the man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” The King James translation says, “the man became a living soul.” Not a living body. A living soul. We are in our 21st century supposedly sophisticated way, tempted to think we are just flesh and blood, water and cells and the spaces in between. We are spiritual beings. And only God can renovate and rejuvenate and restore, souls.

The Lord guides us in “paths of righteousness.” And HE does not do that just for the way it keeps us from killing

ourselves in cars. (If you don't speed there is less likelihood you will crash and burn.) The Lord does that for HIS name's sake. We live and breath, eat and drink, walk and talk and work wearing a label that concerns our manufacture. We were made by God to live with God and one another. The pursuit of righteousness has to do fundamentally with the fact we bear HIS name. It's in the miracle of our genetics. Goes all the way from the reality of what muscle and bone can accomplish to how we can be instruments in the life change that others will experience, just because we treat them as God's children, "as living souls," not made by human hands alone.

David goes on to say, "even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Why? Because the Lord who is my shepherd "is with me." His rod and staff give me comfort. The good shepherd walks with you and me everywhere we go, in every circumstance, every moment of our existence. And HE has the tools, the weapons that provide ultimate protection. One of those tools is the cross of Calvary. Even though I will die, I will live. And I am never alone. In fact it is only when I take this world and things like Covid-19 too seriously that I start to think "maybe I am alone." The 23rd Psalm is a tool for adjusting my set. I must not be foolish, but the fact is, "the Lord is my shepherd."

Verses 5 and 6 serve as reminders that we are children of the King. There are times when I think I am surrounded by forces (like little tiny viruses) that would like to destroy me. But as Barbara calls me to the dinner table, I am

reminded it is not our dinner table, it and everything on it are provisions of the King. And I am not alone in this world, or with my difficulties and problems. There is an empty chair at the table, a chair for the King, the good shepherd.

The image of having your head anointed with oil, and a wine cup that overflows, are images that remind me of Jesus teaching about the rebellious child, who tried to make it on his own. When he comes to his senses and returns home, he finds the Father against whom he rebelled waiting for him, running to meet him, welcoming him with honour he does not deserve, but which are the fruits of God's everlasting love. Forgiveness involves restoration and elevation.

And when you know that, that "God restores our souls," each and every time we seek His forgiveness, how can you fail to think, it's a good life. All the days are good. And as long as I remember that the Lord is my shepherd....I'll find my way home. And HE will bathe me in showers of HIS love and His blessing.

And because you believe, even if your faith is no bigger than a grain of mustard seed, you are witnesses to these very realities. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."

Let us pray;

Lord for this gem in the book full of precious jewels that reveal your love for us, we give thanks. Be with us as we prepare for a return to worship in the Sanctuary at St. Andrew's

on the 20th of September. Be with us as we prepare the sanctuary and be with us as we see brothers and sisters face to face, yes masked, as the fellowship is reconstituted. Inspire us by the means of your word and the power of your Spirit's presence. Witness to us and for us about the Lordship of Jesus. Grant that we might taste your grace like honey. Amen