

Sunday, May 3, 2020
Community Christian Reformed Church
Pastor Carel Geleynse

A blessed Sunday to you all!

My name is Carel Geleynse and I am one of the pastors at Community Christian Reformed Church in Kitchener, Ontario. In light of the on-going pandemic and our inability to gather in large groups, it is my privilege to preach the message from my home. This message is accompanied by an order of worship, including a song play list, that can be found on the Church at Home link on our website – ccrc.on.ca. Welcome to my home and thank you for joining us in worship this Sunday.

Our Scripture Reading this morning is from the book of Psalms and then the very familiar Psalm 23. But before we go to the Scriptures please join me in **prayer**: Oh, Lord as we continue our journey through a pandemic and through some deep valleys we turn to you, our Good Shepherd and ask for your continued care and comfort. Where else can we go? Speak to us through your Word and Spirit and encourage us in the journey. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen.

Read Psalm 23

The Word of the Lord!
Thanks be to God.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Psalm 23 is one of those jewels in the scriptures. It is one of the best known and most often quoted of the Psalms or portions of the Bible. As one writer put it, "During its journey through the ages of mankind, this psalm has stilled more pain than all our doctors, and it has given more peace to the human race than all the wisdom of the world."

(Kuyvenhoven, Daylight, April 12) So today, in the light of our new “strange” reality as we continue to journey through the COVID-19 pandemic and the disaster that it has wrought, and amidst the added horror of the slaughter of 22 of our fellow citizens in Nova Scotia two weeks ago, let’s take a fresh look at a portion of Scripture that many of us know so well. Where else can we find hope in these troubling times but in Jesus, who is the Good Shepherd and the very one who eternally looks after his sheep?

And that is, indeed, what the Good Shepherd does, as David, the writer of this Psalm knew all too well from his own life.

Now, David, prior to being anointed as king over all of Israel, was himself a shepherd who spent many a day out on the fields keeping watch over his flock. He led his sheep to water and pastures where they could drink and eat and all the while he protected them from predators and provided safety. As David was out in the fields watching over *his* flock it occurred to him that just as he was a shepherd for his sheep, so the Lord was his shepherd. And David was not talking about some idol god, some lifeless god, no David was talking about Yahweh, the very Lord who made the heavens and the earth; the very Lord who was the Creator of all things. But even beyond being the Lord of Creation the Lord David was speaking about was the One who had established a special covenant relationship with his specially chosen people.

As David thought about his life and life in general, he noted that like he cared for his sheep so the Lord cared for *his* sheep – for him. “The Lord is my shepherd, and because he is I lack nothing” said the Psalmist. I lack nothing because - to use the wording of John 10 - He knows my name, he leads me, he protects me now and for all eternity”. Back to the imagery of Psalm 23 - like the shepherd waters and feeds his flock so the Lord waters and feeds us - He restores our soul, that is to say he refreshes us by his word and Spirit. The Good Shepherd goes ahead of his sheep. He gave his life for his sheep, but beyond giving his life for the sheep, he also won the victory over death because he rose

again and therefore is not a dead shepherd, but one who is very much alive. And as a living Shepherd he continues to provide for us and carries us even when we find ourselves walking through the dark valleys and through shadows such as we are facing in this pandemic.

It is always good news for actual sheep when they have a shepherd who cares for them. Even though they may not know it, if they did not have such a person, they would be lost. There are plenty of books written about how much guidance and protection sheep need in order to survive in places like ancient Israel where there was wilderness and where there were predators. In much the same way it is wonderful news for us to know that no matter what happens in life the Good Shepherd, Jesus, is with us and has promised to be with us until the close of the age. And again, there are plenty of books written – not the least of which is the Bible, about how much we need the Lord. We are dependent on him for salvation and life itself!

If your life is anything like mine, there are times when we experience darkness and shadows and valleys. There are times that we are dry, running on empty as it were, frustrated, sad, wondering if the Lord is there or if He has deserted us. Perhaps that is something of what you are experiencing now in the midst of this pandemic or when we were faced with the horror of the killings in Nova Scotia. These sorts of valleys and living in such shadows is never a pleasant experience. In the midst of *our* wildernesses (which can be because we are faced with either mental or physical illness, or we are experiencing broken relationships or abuse or whatever – the wilderness or the valley can have many different causes) and in the midst of what we are facing *at this moment* in world history, reading a Psalm like Psalm 23 helps us to put some things into perspective once again. Because through the words of this psalm, the Lord reminds us of the presence of the Good Shepherd, every step of the way.

It was at a low point in my life, that a colleague ministered to me using Psalm 23. Doing so he put things into perspective for me once

again. He reminded me of three little words from verse 4. The three words were: *though, walk and through*. Simple words, perhaps, but they convey an incredible message of comfort, hope and encouragement to all who hear them.

The first word is "though."

“Even **though** I walk through the valley of shadows, or the dark valley, or the valley of the shadow of death...”

It does not sound like an important word, but my colleague, the late Rev. Bill Versteeg, quoted George Everett Ross, a pastor who himself was overwhelmed with difficulty and tragedy in his own life because of addiction to alcohol. Ross said:

*“I have served in the ministry thirty years, almost thirty-one. I have come to understand that there are two kinds of faith. One says **if** and the other says **though**. One says: “If everything goes well, if my life is prosperous, if I’m happy, if no one I love dies, if I’m successful, then I will believe in God and say my prayers and go to the church and give what I can afford.”*

*The other says **though**: though the cause of evil prospers, though I sweat in Gethsemane, though I must drink my cup at Calvary—nevertheless, precisely then, I will trust the Lord who made me. So Job cries: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him.” In another of the great psalms, Psalm 46, David sings: “Though the waters roar and swell, and though the mountains be cast into the midst of the sea. . . the Lord of hosts is with me, the God of Jacob is my strength.” (Source “Strong in all the Broken Places” by Leonard Sweet - quoted from sermon by George Everett Ross. p. 109)*

The prophet Habakkuk wrote, *“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God*

my Saviour.” (Hab. 3:17-18) Though we experience a pandemic that drastically changes our life; though we live in a world where a rampage takes the lives of 22 of our citizens; though we experience physical and mental illness that may even threaten our lives; though we may be faced with an unknown financial future, and so on – you can add your own “though” statements; yet I believe and I know that the Lord is the Good Shepherd.

I trust that we are a people who understand the concept of **though** and embrace that approach as our approach to faith, because if our faith is built on **ifs** – if life will be pain free and challenge free I will believe - it will totter and fall. Notice what the text says,

“Even **though** I walk through the valley of shadows, or the dark valley, or the valley of the shadow of death...”

Versteeg wrote: *Notice, it does not say “if” I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The word “though” carries with it the expectation that the valley will happen. The word “though” carries with it the assumption that the valley we call suffering and grief is a normal part of life. It certainly was for sheep in the Middle East. In the process of getting from one grazing pasture, or as the Psalmist would call it, one “table” to another, they would often have to travel under the guidance of their shepherds through narrow ravines called wadies. These ravines would be fraught with danger including predators; including spots where the journey could be rough and the possibility of falling off a cliff was high. These wadies could include thieves out to steal sheep. It was a normal part of a lamb’s life to have to journey through these dangerous and sometimes painful places in the process of getting from grazing pasture to pasture. The valley was a part of life. (Bill Versteeg)*

So we ought not to be surprised by the word “though” after all it is bound to happen in this world the Heidelberg Catechism calls a “veil of tears”. As we live our lives we will experience valleys and that ought not to surprise us. Never mind valleys and shadows such as this

pandemic, even beyond that Jesus would have us know that those who confess His name will probably face persecution, even as he was persecuted. We are even called upon to take up our cross and follow him. And the Scriptures even suggest that such difficulties may even be for our good. They shape us and mold us and sharpen our faith. So if you figure that Christianity means health, wealth and happiness 24/7, as some would suggest, think again.

Versteeg said: *There are dangers in assuming that we have an inalienable right to happiness, to a life without problems and grief. If we get ourselves into a rut of assuming that grief and suffering should not be part of our lives, the next step is self-pity, maybe a lot of self-pity, as we look at others, their beauty, their health, their wealth, their relationships, their families and compare our suffering to their apparent lack. In the assumption that we should not suffer, we get ourselves caught in the sins of jealousy and envy, which lie at the core of resentment and bitterness as we look at others. The scriptural perspective is that life includes suffering and my life, your life is no exception, and even Jesus' life was no exception.*

“Though” – a seeming unimportant word, yet filled with reality.

“Even though I **walk** through the valley of shadows, or the dark valley, or the valley of the shadow of death...”

Versteeg said: *The second very important word of our text is the word **walk**. The word walk has to do with **pacing** ourselves. The valley of the shadow of death is not a place for running or stopping; it is a place of careful walking. For sheep that have to journey the steep walls of a wadie, they must make sure their steps are careful and planned. Running would be self-destructive. Grief takes time, careful steps and a lot of effort. And different people walk at different paces, some are slower and more careful than others, some take steps with hesitation, some take steps boldly. But the truth is, this valley of the shadow of death is no place to rush, nor is it a place to ignore the difficult steps that have to be taken. It is a place of walking.*

The valley of shadows is not a place to camp out. It's not a place where we put up our tent for a while. It's not a place for us to stop and admire the beauty of our pain. The valley is not a resting place. The valley of the shadows is a place where scripture calls us to keep on walking because ... is the only passage way from one table to another.

As we wander through the pandemic, through these strange weeks of only essential travel and no gatherings in large numbers and reading about hundreds of people dying because of the virus and so forth, we need to make sure that we keep walking with care. Valleys may be places of beauty if you are a photographer or someone searching for scenery. But for sheep camping out in the wadies is filled with danger. Rock slides or flash floods can occur at any moment and valleys are also places for robbers or predators to hide. So sheep had to keep moving for their own safety and well-being.

In much the same way, as we go through the shadows or dark times, we need to keep going. We need to take care of ourselves physically, mentally and spiritually. We need to walk carefully making sure that we practice physical distancing. We need to sometimes turn off the news and listen to something different. We ought not to camp-out so to speak and dwell on what is going on, but we need to pace ourselves fully aware of the time and place in history where we find ourselves. As we wander through the pandemic, as we wander through various valleys of shadows, we need to be aware of opportunities that await and travel on in anticipation of that which God has in store for us, namely a table prepared, a new pasture of fresh green grass and fresh water. It is important that we keep listening to and walking and following the Good Shepherd who encourages us on. Being in the valleys of our life and in the shadows may provide us a new opportunity to listen to the One in whom is our help and our strength. So continue, as the writer of Hebrews put it, to walk with our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

If you find yourself stuck, overwhelmed, camping-out, as it were, and unable to go on, please find someone to speak to. Find someone who can once again help you to see the Good Shepherd and find someone who can help you hear his voice.

“Even though I walk **through** the valley of shadows, or the dark valley, or the valley of the shadow of death...” *The third very important word in this short text is "through."*

Versteeg said: *The journey of sheep through a wadie is a journey from pasture to pasture. The journey through the valley of shadows or the dark valley, or the shadow of death is a journey that we must get through. It is a passageway to a better field. It is a life changing transition that brings us to a new place, sometimes even a better place; it certainly in the end will bring us to the best place.*

“**Even though I walk through** the valley of shadows, or the dark valley, or the valley of the shadow of death...I will fear no evil for you are with me...surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.”

Through it all, the promise of Scripture is that God, the Good Shepherd, will not necessarily remove the obstacles, or the pain, or the illness or the pandemic or the unemployment, or the persecution, or the challenges to the faith, but He will be with us as we walk and we will get through. The Christian’s confession is that we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ in life and in death. The Christian’s confession is that we lack nothing because the Lord is our Shepherd and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. He, who has gone before us, died and rose again, and he will continue to lead us, to guard our steps, to give us strength, to refresh us, to restore us, to pick us up and to enable us. That is what the Good Shepherd does. He will journey with us even through our unsolved problems, he will correct us when we need correcting, and in the end, we will come to that new pasture, a pasture given us and prepared for us through the work and through the suffering of Jesus.

“Even **though** I walk through the valley of shadows, or the dark valley, or the valley of the shadow of death...I will fear no evil because of the Good Shepherd who walks with us and knows each of us by name.” What a comfort! What a Gospel! To God be the glory! Amen.

Would you **pray** with me?

Oh Good Shepherd, we praise you for your loving care for your sheep. How wonderful that you lead us and journey with us. How wonderful that you never leave us or forsake us even when we walk through darkness and find ourselves in the shadows, as we do now in this pandemic. Some of us, besides the realities of the pandemic, find ourselves in other valleys because of loss of family members or illness or disappointment or worry over those in institutions or over the general state of affairs during this unusual time. Grant us your peace. Don't allow us to get stuck in the valleys or in the shadows, but allow us to hear your voice, Oh Good Shepherd, and so allow us then without fear or worry to follow you to the table prepared. What a hope we have, even amidst this pandemic. In Jesus precious name we pray.
Amen!

As you journey on through the valleys and shadows let me leave this **blessing** with you:

Do not be afraid!
May God the Father prepare your journey,
Jesus the Son guide your footsteps,
The Spirit of Life strengthen your body,
The Three in One watch over you,
on every road that you may follow.