

The Good Shepherd, Mighty to Save

Opening

Some of the first words we ever learned from Scripture remain the most precious: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” We have prayed these words as children; we have prayed these words in adversity. We have prayed these words in a nave filled with people in the joy of Eastertide; we have prayed these words assembled at the funerals and gravesides of those we have loved and lost. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

Now we pray these words in a time and manner none of us have ever known. We lead worship from this sanctuary, the seats of the nave are empty. You gather in worship in your home. We feel the ache of this distance, this physical separation, yet we still say with one voice wherever we gather around this city: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

What other hope do we have in these days? So much has changed so rapidly. Last Sunday seems like a month ago. We are trying to process all that has happened; we cannot see what lies ahead. So we cling to the words that are not only prayer, but a confession of faith and trust: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

Praying the Psalms in a Time of Coronavirus

These words may be the only words of Scripture people outside the faith know. I wonder how many people reached for the Scriptures this week and read and re-read the 23rd Psalm. These words are sources of everlasting faith and comfort. But for us, who are people of the Book; for Anglicans who pray the Psalms in season and out of season, every Sunday and every weekday; we bear witness that Psalm 23 is a gateway to even more treasures of strength, hope, and comfort in the Psalms.

Consider the words we have prayed from the Psalms in the Daily Office during this tumultuous week. On Tuesday when things changed rapidly, we prayed Psalm 39: “And

now, Lord, what is my hope? Truly my hope is in you.” On Wednesday, we learned our bishops’ decision that all ACNA churches would not hold public worship services for the near future. Daily life changed even more quickly. We prayed Psalm 42 on Wednesday evening. We can wrestle with God in prayer even as we turn to him:

I pour out my heart when I remember how I went with the multitude and brought them into the house of God, with the voice of praise and thanksgiving among those who keep holy day.

We can pray from the gut. We can pray our questions, our pain, our doubts, our fears. But still we confess our faith in the Lord, our shepherd: ‘O put your trust in God, for I will yet give him thanks, who is my salvation and my God.’¹

On Thursday when we woke up to more bad news, we were called to prayer with these words from Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”² And that strong psalm of faith concluded with a testimony of God’s presence in the depths of trouble: ‘The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.’ My brothers and sisters, there is no other safe refuge in these uncertain times.

Who is Your Refuge?

Why does God permit a pandemic? I do not know. I do know it’s pretty obvious that God is stripping away so many things upon which we’ve placed our confidence. And here I commend the insights of Bishop Robert Barron’s meditation on the prophets. The prophets reveal how we have built altars and worshiped wealth, power, pleasure, and honor. Every one of those temptations, those idols are being revealed in their emptiness right now. The things of this world cannot provide refuge in a vulnerable time like this. They are literally powerless to save.

¹ Psalm 42.

² Psalm 46:1, ESV

When all is stripped away; when so much that has been so certain for so long suddenly changes, what can we say? “The Lord is my shepherd....Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” ³

You are with me when I’m confined to my home. You are with me when I’m anxious. You are with me when I cannot sleep. You are with me if my job or income suddenly changes. You are with me if I get coronavirus. You are with me if things worsen.

The same David who wrote about the valley in Psalm 23 confessed hope in God in Psalm 139 if darkness descended further:

“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol (hell), you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.” ⁴

Healing of Blind Man

As our world descends into a time of darkness; as we cling to the Psalms that God is with us in the valley of the shadow of death, we also cling to this story of a man born blind whose darkness ended. The healing story from John 9 describes healing in more ways than one. It’s a healing story of body *and* soul.

I’ll compress a lot of theology in this long story. The blind man experiences *two* healings of his sight in this story. And the healing of his physical sight is *not* the most important healing. After he leaves the pool of Siloam, he can see faces for the first time, his neighbors and his

³ Psalm 23.1,4

⁴ (Psalm 139:7–12, ESV)

parents. Yet he doesn't recognize *who* it is that healed him. He knows his name, he says 'the man called Jesus' healed me. But his vision is still blurry about who Jesus is. The man thinks 'a prophet' healed him. Furthermore, no one recognizes who it is that healed this man—not his parents, his neighbors, not the Pharisees. John is telling us: everyone has gone blind; everyone has this illness. It's a microcosm of human history.

We live in this time when illness and infection has caused tremendous amount of confusion, but here's a story where *healing* caused tremendous confusion. Everyone is thrown into confusion by this man's *healing*, but there's another miracle of sight awaiting him. Jesus finds him *after the Pharisees throw him out of church* and then asks him, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' The healed man can't see clearly. He looks straight at Jesus and asks "Who is he?" And Jesus says, in his mercy, "You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you." And the healed blind man says, 'Lord I believe.' Until now, the healed blind man had not called Jesus, 'Lord.' But now he has received the second healing. Now he sees the Good Shepherd is the Son of Man. And the twice-healed man worshipped the Lord Jesus. What is the next chapter—John 10—about? The Good Shepherd. "The Lord is my shepherd."

Blindness to Christ: the Ultimate Illness

Illness, disease, and healing became the experience by which a blind man encountered the Lord Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Illness becomes either a time when our vision is sharpened about what matters most, or a time of temptation when we turn to earthly things which cannot save.

We are here to worship and glorify the Lord and bear witness that nothing else can save us except the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wealth cannot save, earthly power cannot save; pleasure and honor cannot save. David wrote, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the Name of the Lord our God."

The Pharisees became an example of trusting in their own power; the healed man an example of trusting in the Name of the Lord Jesus. Jesus described the Pharisees, who trusted in their own power, as 'blind guides.' Those who trust in their own power cannot

lead you out of the valley of the shadow of death. Only the Good Shepherd can lead us through the darkness. Repentance is turning to him and calling on the Name of the Lord who alone can save.

In times of plague and natural disaster, the Church's response has been constant: we repent of our sins. We turn to God alone who is our Refuge and strength.

In the Supplication of the Great Litany that we prayed last Sunday, we said:

With pity behold the sorrows of our hearts; Mercifully forgive the sins of your people.

Our Lord Jesus who is full of compassion and mercy; who looked upon the sick with great compassion and healed them is the same Lord who said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."⁵ That's Jesus sounding very un-Jesus like, at least to our modern ears. The Lord teaches us to practice a holy fear regarding our souls. The healing our world needs is certainly healing of body—come, Lord Jesus. Yet we have deep and profound diseases of the soul, too. There is only one medicine for the sickness of the soul: repentance—turning to the Good Shepherd.

One of our greatest Anglican saints, John Donne wrote extensively about a long illness from his sickbed in a collection of writings called *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. In the final prayer of that collection, Donne offered two prayers:

1. He asked that he wouldn't relapse into the sins of his youth (of which there were many famous and wild transgressions!)
2. He asked that God would not forsake him if he returned to sinful habits due to weakness.

Donne prayed:

⁵ Matthew 10:28, ESV

Though the rocks and the sands, the heights and the shallows, the prosperity and the adversity of this world, do diversely threaten me, though mine own leaks endanger me, O God, let me never...make shipwreck of faith and a good conscience. ⁶

That is the faith and prayer of a man whose sight is healed, even in the face of his own death, even in the hour of his own temptation.

In the final sermon John Donne preached just days before his death, a sermon entitled 'Death's Duel,' Donne proclaimed that Jesus' suffering wasn't limited to Holy Week and Good Friday. Donne saw that from his manger to his cross, our Lord Jesus lived a life of suffering. And he saw a connection for us: 'since all of Christ's life was a continual passion (suffering), all our Lent may be a continual Good Friday.' ⁷ So strange how those words spoken in 1630 seem fitting in 2020.

A Royal Priesthood

What do you do when 'all our Lent may be a continual Good Friday?' We've been meditating on what it means to be a royal priesthood for several weeks. In ways entirely hidden from us, God has been preparing us to become a faithful, royal priesthood for these days ahead. Yes, we must always be people both of prayer and action. Good works is central to our priestly task in the world. But consider how limited; how finite our actions are in the wake of a pandemic.

When your actions are limited; when you must self-quarantine; when you are required to stay home, we must consecrate our homes anew with prayer and worship.

⁶ John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, 152.

⁷ John Donne, *Death's Duel*, p. 170

Cranmer and the Domestic Church

I find it providential that yesterday we celebrated the feast day of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury during the English Reformation. If you're new to Anglican faith, Thomas Cranmer was the principal author and editor of the Book of Common Prayer. His vision was clear: the Book of Common Prayer was the Scripture arranged for worship. Cranmer believed that Scripture would bring healing and renewal to the English nation. The Book of Common Prayer ordered worship in every parish, but the vision was greater. Prayer book worship was meant to make every household a church, a place of constant prayer. It was a practical method for equipping the saints to be a faithful, royal priesthood on every street in their parish.

And now we find ourselves nearly 500 years removed from that time, surprisingly restricted to life at home. Each household can become a chapel in this city. Each home can become a domestic church. When we cannot gather at Apostles on Robinson Road, let Apostles make their homes holy by regular prayer, by works of mercy among neighbors.

One hundred years after the first Book of Common Prayer was published a Great Plague broke out in London and southern England. The year was 1665. Daniel Defoe, who you may remember as the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, kept a journal during this time. Defoe wrote that the days of plague become days of 'uncommon devotion,' particularly around acts of repentance and humility. Morning and evening prayer were faithfully conducted in churches. Prayer *increased* in homes and in church when people were restricted from other public gatherings.

Call to Prayer

In our time of plague, we can renew to our Lord Jesus through the Book of Common Prayer. Every household a domestic church. I encourage you to pray the Daily Office every day, Morning and Evening Prayer if you are able. The Daily Office is being live streamed through our diocese's website adots.org. Particularly focus on the words of the Psalms. And expect that God will surprise you and guide you through the Psalms. The writer of Hebrews wrote that 'The word of God is living and active,' so we can expect the Holy Spirit to meet us in

Scripture each day. Praying the Psalms will keep us anchored in God's strength, comfort, and hope.

I also ask that each household pray the Supplication from the Great Litany at some point every day. It's a brief prayer liturgy which may be found on page 97-98 of the ACNA 2019 BCP. Our office will email send instructions on how to practically pray in this way. This is what a royal priesthood does in time of plague. We call upon the Name of the Lord, who alone has the power to save us. He alone is our Good Shepherd.

A Good Shepherd

Lastly, keep your eyes on the Lord who is our shepherd. All is not dark. David spoke of the Good Shepherd's green pastures and still waters. That same Good Shepherd brings dogwoods to life again. Tennessee irises and crocuses are on the way. Red buds and cherry blossoms are bringing their own incense to praise the Lord. Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us even in these difficult days. And let us praise Him who is our Good Shepherd, our only Refuge and Deliverer, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.