

Bp Aitken Synod Sermon

May 3, 2020 Easter 4

Lessons: Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

Dear beloved in our Synod,
Grace and peace to you, through Christ our brother, our Good Shepherd, and Lord.

Psalm 23, appointed as one of the lessons today, is the best known passage of Scripture in the whole world, and one of the most powerful ones. Let's look and listen to how this psalm, linked together today with Jesus in our gospel lesson brings new life to us in our "Valley of the Shadow of death."

The person who wrote Psalm 23 was on a journey. Like yours and mine, it was a journey of life and of faith. Something happened to this person, something tragic. You live long enough and you'll experience not only the beauty but also the pain of life. It will happen. And you will have questions that Psalm 23 addresses honestly. You might be worried today about a loved one who could easily get the coronavirus. Or maybe you have already lost a friend or relative to it. You may be living with another "dark valley" right now with that relative whose life has hit bottom with deep anxiety, chemical dependency, or loss of income to take care of your family.

The bad thing that happens to this Biblical writer shows up in the very middle of the psalm. In Verse 4, "Even though I walk through the *darkest valley* (or, in earlier translations, "*the valley of the shadow of death*") are the words that describe the author's tragedy.

Before verse four, things went well: There were quiet waters, lush green pastures and life was good, then the tragedy happens. We don't know what it was; it could have been that the Psalmist experienced the death of a family member, or that death was approaching soon. Or it could have been an illness that would force the Psalmist or a loved one out of the community in those days, or a huge rejection or betrayal. But something tragic happened. The author does not mince words or cover this tragedy with sugary piety. Notice how Psalm 23 does not declare that God keeps pious people safe from all harm or that your life will be danger-free if you pray, read scripture and do good things. It doesn't say that those who love God will receive a protection bubble from illness or the power of wind, water or gravity. I once had an Intern, back in the 90's who wrote a paper for Seminary entitled, "Into every Life a little rain must Fall." And of course this is true. We used that paper as a resource for faith and bible study and the problem of evil and natural tragedies. That can be helpful, well and good for when there are no pandemics, when your own life isn't in the balance. What we are getting in Psalm 23 is more: it is the real life journey of faith that ends in strength and new life in the midst of tragedy.

Hear the Good News in this famous Psalm. In the last half of Psalm 23 we get in on how the writer has experienced God in some powerful way, right in the valley of the shadow of death. God doesn't abandon us but leads us through the dangers. Psalm 23 invites us to experience living with trust in the goodness of God. Back in seminary I was introduced to the devotional writings of first century rabbis. I came across one who wrote a morning prayer I have never forgotten. He wrote, "O Holy One, if this were the *only*

day You would have granted me to live, for this day alone, I give you eternal thanks.”

Now Hear the Psalm again: “Even though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me *in the presence of* my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” (Verses 4-6)

Many of you know that my good friend and mentor of 35 years, Pastor Earl Carlson died on Easter Sunday just a few weeks ago. He was 101 years old and we talked right up to his last days. What the Psalmist says about God’s goodness, even in the midst of tragedy is exactly what Earl taught me over and over. He was born with polio – and it remained in his body all his life until in his old age he was bent in half from the waist. I remember many people saying to him, “Why you, Earl? You are so kind, so helpful, you bring us such joy. Why do you have to suffer, why did God let this happen to you?” And you know what he would say?

“Why *not* me”? Life is good, Life is beautiful. This kind of thing happens to many people, why should I be different? And just remember, like you my life is joined to Jesus’ life forever.”

Jesus knew, didn’t he, what it meant to live in God’s world, with goodness, risks, and tragedy. He entered it and through his life, death and resurrection showed God’s power in the midst of all that life can bring us. He was not ashamed to call us – as you know –

sisters and brothers to him. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our own faith, standing with us in the midst of our weakness and fear to bring new life into us when we need it most.

God is not a magic rabbit's foot, or lucky charm. God is the love that brings us hope, the strength to live in adversity, the courage to stand against evil, the joy to live life abundantly as Jesus says in our Gospel lesson today: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (verse 10) And God is the power to endure suffering as the Psalmist proclaims and the power to serve our neighbor as Martin Luther always reminded his flock.

We may wish God had made a different kind of world. But this is the world God made and God is still working in, redeeming all of creation, all of humankind, even our last "enemies" and tragedies. Christ says to you today: 'I am your gate, I am your shepherd, I am your bread, your sustenance, your resurrection and life. 'And he will bring us home one day. You can count on it, today, tomorrow, next week, the rest of your lives and into Eternity.

Trust the Story. Trust Jesus. Trust the gospel.
To the glory of God, and the good of your neighbor.

Amen.