

Barre Congregational Church

March 22, 2020:

A Pastoral message: The Lord is our Shepherd
Scripture Reading: Psalm 23

Grace and peace to you, dear members and friends of the Barre Congregational Church. I am writing to you from my home on this fourth Sunday of Lent, a time when we as Christians remember the journey Christ had taken, preparing Himself for the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. As many Christians around the world today gather in prayer for God's mercy and protection against the Coronavirus, I am asking that we too take the time today and each day, to pray for ourselves, for one another and the world, and may this message from Psalm 23 give us hope in the days ahead...

While we are physically separated from one another, we can be assured that God is with us and still speaks to us in the same way as during our worship services in the sanctuary.

Please pray this prayer in silence...

*Dear God, we come before You as a congregation,
acknowledging You as our Maker and Shepherd.*

*We are like sheep today, needing You and trusting that You will take care of us
during this very difficult Coronavirus crisis.*

We confess our belief in You, Your Son and the Holy Spirit.

*We ask that You give us faith to rest in the knowledge
that with You we will walk through the good times and bad times.*

*Help us not to fear, but to believe and trust in Your holy power and Your protection and
remind us of the sacrifice Your Son went through for our salvation.*

We pray for all our needs and ask You for Your forgiveness of our sins.

Amen

Scripture Reading: Psalm 23

Please spend a moment and read through the Psalm prayerfully...

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters;

3 He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for His name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

6 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.

I love the words of Old Testament scholar, Bernard W. Anderson, when he says, “the psalms are Israel’s way of responding to Yahweh’s active presence in its history. They are anthems to the glory of God!” I can imagine how the people of Israel needed to find creative ways to communicate with God, and give expression to their joys, their distress and their sorrows. They needed a vehicle to say, “Yes Lord, we know You are with us! We believe! We have faith, even though the journey is hard!” The Book of Psalms is therefore at the heart of the Old Testament, says Anderson. We may not know exactly the history and background of every psalm, but collectively, they have become to the people of Israel what our hymns have become for us, messages rising to the throne of God!

A Statement of Certainty. “The Lord is my Shepherd!”

In Psalm 23, perhaps the world’s most beloved psalm, we find David, a former shepherd who became King of Israel, declaring his faith in God, and describing life with God as an experience of serenity -- of green pastures and quiet waters. If we were to close our eyes, we could, like David, maybe find ourselves sitting on a stone somewhere in and around Barre, watching the beauty of the fields, and listening to the sounds of a little stream, and together give glory to God for the beauty of the earth, and the peace of God with us. David

explains how Yahweh is making him lie down in those pastures and leading him in paths of righteousness. His is a picture of certainty, of peace and of resting in God's grace.

David's state of serenity is not without some intrusion, though. We see in the middle of this psalm the image of him walking through the valley of the shadow of death. We must remember that the shepherds in Biblical times traveled long distances, which at times could be very dangerous. It appears that David was traveling from Judea to the heights of Galilee, through dangerous canyons and caves and narrow trails, hence this description of a valley of death. So, on the one hand we see him in an incredibly peaceful environment, but then his journey took him through the valley of the shadow of death.

If we go back to verse 1 of this psalm, we see a statement of such certainty: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want". As a former shepherd, David uses this shepherd imagery, knowing the importance of the relationship between shepherds and their sheep. The shepherd knew his sheep well, and took care of them under all circumstances, whether good or bad. He understood what it meant to be a shepherd, leading and caring, and knowing the needs of the sheep. Robert J. Morgan wrote in his book on the 23rd Psalm, "During his (David's) formation as a shepherd he thought of himself as a sheep, trusting the Lord to do for him what he was doing for his flock". To make a statement like this, the Lord is my Shepherd, therefore meant that David had experienced God's goodness, caring presence and guidance under all circumstances. The Hebrew word for the Lord is Yahweh, which means I am, and in this verse, he meant to say that Yahweh is present now, not in the distant future! God is with us now and always, in good times and bad. Yahweh's existence is so real in David's experience, that it does not matter that there are these shadows in the valleys of death. He will be safely led through those valleys, verse 4 assures us.

David will not be in want, says verse 1, because the Lord is his shepherd under all circumstances. In this context he expresses the gratitude towards God for being with him when he is in need, feels abandoned and in danger. He will not lack anything. He will fear no evil, he will be comforted, and he will experience the intimate presence of the Lord forever.

May we rest in David's faith

This psalm speaks of faith in a Living God. It is a psalm of light and strength and hope during dark times. Many have found their comfort in this psalm. It speaks of God as a Shepherd who wants to help, lead, guide and protect us as well, during this crisis.

As human beings it is natural to fear in the face of this enormous crisis we are dealing with. It is normal to worry about our own health and that of our loved ones and friends and colleagues. What is important, though, is to believe and to say out loud, that the Lord knows all of this, that the Lord is our Shepherd, and knows our fears, our needs and our circumstances. I pray that we all will believe and say like the people of Israel, "Yes Lord, we know You are with us! We believe! We have faith, even though the journey is hard!" I pray that we will not lose faith in this valley of the shadow of death, but that we will walk through it with the help and presence of our Lord, our Shepherd. May God soon rescue us and bring us to a place of green pastures and quiet waters. Amen!

Prayer and benediction:

Dear Lord, please help us to believe that You are our Shepherd.

Protect us all and lead us through this crisis and strengthen our faith in You

Fill us with love for You and one another, now and always.

Give us Your peace...

May the grace of God, and the love of Christ

and the presence of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever

Amen

Pastor Margaret Keyser