

Tracy Daub
3/22/20--University Presbyterian Church
Psalm 23

ABUNDANCE

The Lenten season is a time when many Christians choose to give up something as a spiritual discipline. They may give up eating chocolate, or sugar, or meat, or consuming alcohol or soft drinks. They may give up smoking, or shopping, or swearing. However, who could have guessed that this Lent would demand that we give up *everything*. Everything! To give up going to school. To give up going to work. To give up Sunday worship and concerts and the theater. To give up going to the gym and the movies and the shopping mall. To give up going out to restaurants and book stores and dinner parties. To give up meeting with friends over coffee and traveling to see family and taking vacations. The coronavirus pandemic has shut down life as we know it and has stripped from us virtually all the ordinary and cherished components of our lives. So, what is left after we've given up everything in our lives?

Since ancient times, people of faith have turned to the Book of Psalms during hard and anxious times. And one psalm in particular, Psalm 23, has offered great consolation and hope to those enduring trials and difficulties. That is why it is a favorite psalm at funerals when people experience the heartbreak of losing a loved one, when their world suddenly collapses, and their sense of well-being is shaken. But Psalm 23 is a versatile psalm and speaks to any of us enduring any kind of loss or struggle or threat.

So it is especially appropriate and timely that among the lectionary readings designated for today, is Psalm 23. In this time when we are enduring a loss of so much in our lives, when our sense of well-being is threatened, when we are stripped of the activities that bring meaning

to our lives, and are kept physically away from people we love and care about, we need Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 is classified as a "psalm of trust." In this psalm the writer affirms great trust in God. But these words of trust are not written by someone enjoying a life of ease and comfort. Rather, these words of trust are spoken by someone experiencing troubled times. "Trouble" is explicitly discussed in this psalm when the writer talks about experiencing "dark valleys" in life, about the threat of some unspecified "evil," and about the lurking presence of "enemies." But "trouble" is also implied in more subtle ways. When the writer states, "God restores my soul," it is because some kind of adversity in life has *depleted* the psalmist's soul. When the psalmist writes, "God makes me lie down in green pastures; God leads me beside still waters," it is because his or her life has been *churned up* by some kind of misfortune and the writer is in need of being calmed, and quieted, and comforted. This is a psalm written by someone who knows first-hand the very real threats of life, who knows what it is like to have someone or something precious taken from you, who knows what it is like to experience loss and misfortune. In other words, the writer of Psalm 23 understands emotional and psychological and material scarcity. Things have been taken from this writer.

And things have been taken from us. We are experiencing emotional, psychological, and material kinds of scarcity. The scarcity we face is not just about not having enough toilet paper to see us through this crisis, which judging from all the empty grocery store shelves seems to have been a paramount concern for vast numbers of us! The scarcity we experience is not just about having enough material goods to last us through this time of hardship. We are experiencing other kinds of scarcity. Our psychological sense of well-being has been taken from us. We lack a feeling of control over our lives. There is a shortage of confidence in knowing

what tomorrow will bring. Information about how long this crisis will last is insufficient. Those with loved ones in nursing facilities are deprived of the emotional comfort of being able to physically see and check on their family member. Much has been taken from us.

And yet, precisely when so much has been taken from us, Psalm 23 invites us to consider our abundance. In fact, Psalm 23 is a celebration of abundance--a celebration of abundance in the face of our emotional, psychological, and material scarcities. Abundance is everywhere in this psalm. The shepherd leads us to *green* pastures--not just any pastures, but those that are lush with life and can nourish the sheep. In the midst of a desert terrain, the shepherd finds life-giving water, and not just any water, but *still* waters, knowing that sheep won't drink from moving waters. In the midst of the dark valley, we are reminded that the shepherd carries a rod and staff and thus has all the tools necessary to ward off dangerous animals. We find abundance in the banquet table that is set before every one of us and in the cup that is not only filled for our refreshment but which overflows in a display of extravagant abundance. We read in this psalm that "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life," but the word used here for "follow me" actually means "to pursue," or "to hunt down." So persistent are God's goodness and mercy that they chase us down like hounds on a hunt. This psalm celebrates God's abundant generosity toward us. We are reminded of the abundant nature of God's steadfast presence with us in and through all things, of God's abundant love for us, of God's abundant goodness and mercy toward us.

Psalm 23 reminds us that when everything has been taken from us, what remains is the awareness of God's abundance. We are not promised that we will never know evil, darkness, or enemies in our lives. But the psalm reminds us of the promise of God to be with us in all things and to offer us God's never-ending supply of love, guidance, and care.

And here's the wonderful, amazing part: we can be part of that abundance. The psalmist proclaims, "God leads me in right paths for his name's sake." God leads us in *right* paths. We learn what those right paths are by looking at the life of Jesus Christ. Those are the paths of generosity, the paths of love--the challenging kind of love that even includes one's enemies, the paths of service, the paths of forgiveness, the paths of hope, the paths of gratitude. When we walk these paths, we are able to extend God's abundance to others, and simultaneously we will discover that we ourselves are filled with a great abundance--even as we endure some of the scarcities that come with hardship and loss.

In the midst of this crisis, I've witnessed many of our own church members walking these right paths of God's abundant love. I've been impressed by the dedication of our Food Pantry volunteers who have endeavored to keep the Pantry operating so that those in need in our community will not experience a scarcity of food. Working from home, or even long distance from other states, the volunteers have coordinated the Pantry's operations, worked to recruit extra volunteers, and formulated evolving plans for how to safely operate the Pantry.

I have been grateful to John Swaine, who makes the time to come to the church to help me record an audio recording of these sermons which we then download to our church's website so that people at home will not know the scarcity of spiritual comfort during these times when we cannot gather together. John turns on the recording device and then sits in a pew as I preach my sermon from the pulpit to a congregation of one! He is your spiritual surrogate and when I look at him, I am seeing all of you!

I have witnessed the abundance of generosity from our staff members, each giving their time and efforts to reorganize the way we conduct the church's business in light of all the

changes. I have witnessed members calling other members to check on one another, and delivering needed items to one another's homes. In the face of all kinds of scarcity, I have seen much abundance, the kind of abundance that comes from people walking in God's right paths. Psalm 23 helps us to see these signs of God's abundance and to give thanks, to give thanks with all our hearts for the way God steadfastly leads us in these right paths of meaning and hope.

In closing, I share a poem that was sent to me this past week. It is entitled *Pandemic* and was written to address these difficult days we are experiencing right now. I included it in an email to the congregation but I share it here again because I think it speaks to discovering abundance at a time when so much has been taken from us.

Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

—Lynn Ungar 3/11/20