

The Rev. Jess Sexton
St. Anne's Episcopal Church
Sunday, March 22, 2020

In the name of my redeemer, sustainer, and friend. Amen.

Landon Saunders had a 30-minute radio show in the 1960s that was heard by millions across the US (some of you may remember him). One afternoon, it was about 10 minutes before he was about to go on the air and it was announced that President John F. Kennedy had been shot. In that moment Saunders knew that everything he had prepared to talk about that day was pointless.

But what was he going to say?

Time kept ticking by and before he knew it, he was the air. So, what did he do? He sat down and read Psalm 23. That was it and then he got up and walked out.

Sometimes nobody knows what to say. Especially, in times like this when there is a big unknown--something that we can't control or contain. And this produces a lot of fear of what is to come.

So what do you say in times like these? Saunders didn't know. And to be honest neither do I. A virus. A pandemic. Like many of you I feel like I'm in a sci-fi film.

But whether it's coronavirus, or the loss of a leader, an attack on our country like 9/11 or our own struggles and losses--Sometimes, we just don't have the words.

How do we even pray?

That's why we need scripture. When we don't know what to say to one another or even to God, we have the words of our creator to help us pray.

Will you join me in reading Psalm 23? Any version that you prefer.

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

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

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.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”

Our God has blessed us with these words of David that have spoken to us in our times of grief at a funeral and especially in times of anxiety and trepidation like today. The words of Psalm 23 are exactly what we need right now. These words of prayer, that David prayed so many years ago, help fill in the blanks of our prayers that have no words right now.

The transcendent beauty of these words of trust and certainty of God’s protection and presence in our lives is what we need to remember and hold onto in this time of unknown when we don’t know what to say.

Words that make us remember that God walks beside us. That God will lead us in times of uncertainty and fear. That God’s love and mercy will sustain us now and always. That we are not alone but that our shepherd, our faithful God, is our strength and guide to get us through this time.

A time that is very scary. That is why we need to stay in prayer.

Because the truth is when David prayed “I will fear no evil,” that did not mean that David was without fear. He wasn’t fearless. That’s not humanly possible. There are things we are fearful of that are not evil like being sick or losing a job or

being alone or wondering how you're going to pay your bills or get food or whether or not were good enough.

It is okay to have fear. It is okay to be scared right now. It is okay to be afraid when we feel we have no control. It is normal to feel all of those things at this moment in time. David, a leader to his people, he too had his own fears and anxiety. That's why he was praying!

But what we can't do right now is let our fear get in the way of remembering who is sovereign. And that is our heavenly and gracious God who is with us right now—in our anxiety, our grief of losing normalcy and safety, and our fear of what's to come. A God who is equally pained by how this virus has affected our world.

God gave David the words of trust and hope, and now he has given them to us to pray. To remind us that God is our Good Shepherd who loves us unconditionally and we are never separated from that love. A love that gives us courage to hope and to trust in him.

The shepherd who knows what the sheep do not. Yet we the sheep of God's fold are called to trust even when our lives are shadowed by fear. To trust that God is with us in this valley and that God's love, mercy and goodness does follow each and every one of us every day.

We may not know what will happen with this virus and who will get sick, and all the unknowns of the aftermath of this pandemic but what we do know is that in the midst of our fear, we are never separated from God. God's love is a light in our world despite the shadows. God's love has lightened our world already through your love and support of one another.

It has shined through those who were able to donate food to the Stanton Center, through those making sure people can receive their medications, and through all those calling each other to check in. God's love shines through the kindness of our messages that we post online, and the ways we still try to connect even though we are physically apart.

God's love and hope is evident through the tireless efforts of our doctors, nurses and all those working on the front lines of this pandemic who are caring for God's people while putting themselves at risk. God's love is still shining and needs to continue through you. Because Love is a bright light in the midst of the darkness of our fears.

So, friends in Christ, stay in prayer. Let God hold your fears for you right now and be his love in this world. You may not have the words to express how you are feeling, or the words to pray but remember...

"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.

BECAUSE "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I WILL dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." AMEN.