

In the Presence of A Pandemic

A Sermon Expositing the 23rd Psalm

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I'm not buying it. I don't know about you.

I'm not buying it, because I've been trying to live it and I've decided it is at best unattainable and at worst unwise.

I've been trying to live into the words of the 23rd Psalm in the midst of a global pandemic that has wreaked havoc on a state I have come to love, that has reached my wider community, that threatens me, a congregation and a number of people I care for deeply. I don't know if you've been trying to do the same thing, but I have been trying to look into this darkest valley and through gritted teeth and with determination say, "I will not be afraid."

Like all of you and *with* many of you, I've been grappling with the immediate logistical concerns of this new and prayerfully temporary life we're living. We're all figuring out how to do home-life in a time when home-life is all we have. We are trying to figure out how to keep pantries stocked, how to stay in touch with family and friends, how to fill our days constructively, how to get a little exercise, how to keep education moving forward for kids, how to use Zoom. We're all making decisions about what events and initiatives and projects can carry on, which have to be postponed or canceled. We've all had a lot on our minds and this, for me, has helped me buy *initially* into a surface reading of the 23rd Psalm. "I will not be afraid," I thought, "because I'll just keep busy and not think about it."

"I will not be afraid," I thought, and then – if you can indulge a bit of self-disclosure from your pastor – and then a sleepless night. After the lights were out I started running back through the day and the gravity of it all started to sit heavy with me. Anna and I have a semblance of youth remaining (more her than me) and a comfortable home and plenty of groceries and we're healthy. We have what we need to withstand the times even if it were to come to illness for us. It wasn't really our immediate wellbeing I was afraid of, but I started to think about all of those who can't say the same – those who have higher risk factors for the virus itself, and those who have vulnerabilities exposed by the community response to the outbreak. I thought about those whose livelihoods are centered around businesses that won't be able to stay in operation, especially those that won't survive a pause of – of how long? So I started to think about how long we might be in this strange way of living and what it will be like when the rigor and struggle and isolation remain, but the newness wears off; when we won't have the busyness of reinventing things to distract us. Who will be lonely? Who in our community will be forgotten? How do we care for one another and *be* with one another even when we can't be with one another. I've never thought of what the social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of widespread isolation might be – loneliness at the individual level, yes, but population level? We're in uncharted territory.

And of course we know that while these concerns have primary place for many, they arrive in all of our lives secondary to a larger concern – that of the pandemic itself. I'm growing tired of the phrase, "We think..." With regard to how the virus is spread *we think* we know the answer and how widespread it could become *we think* we have some estimates and how to defeat it in the end *we think* we're on the right track in the early stages

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

of vaccine development. We *know* almost nothing, but we do know that all models of what could happen if we don't collectively respond with aggressive measures point to a scale of suffering and loss I find unmentionable. We also know that even with aggressive measures the disease will come to some and it will bring disruption and suffering and I struggle even now to say what else it can bring. In that dark and sleepless night I could see the faces of those in my life I worry about most in the days ahead and I saw them set against the maps and the charts that I see in the news each day.

The Psalmist says, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid." I'm not buying it.

Or at least I'm not buying as we read it all too often. The 23rd is a Psalm of confidence the scholars say and they're not wrong. The writer is clearly expressing confidence in God to provide and protect, but we tend to hear the words themselves as standing somehow above the worry, above the fear, untouched by it. So confident in God is the Psalmist that they don't even sense the presence of danger or feel fear rising within them. But I realized something. There is no occasion in which to volunteer, "I am not afraid," unless there is something present worth being afraid of. It isn't the kind of thing we typically offer up in a vacuum. Being a male of the species and having been encultured thusly I recall a number of times in my life having either said or tried to prove that I wasn't afraid of something. I also recall that in each and every one of those moments, I was afraid. I have photos of myself taken by one of those high speed cameras on a roller coaster having been dared to keep my hands up the entire ride. They were up alright, and the look on my face was that of sheer terror. "I'm not scared of that," I was trying to say, but my face betrayed me. "I'm fine, I'm fine," I said on another occasion when the trail I was on passed right by some underbrush where we'd just seen a snake slither and I had to pass by. Usain Bolt couldn't have covered those ten feet faster than I did and I had chills running down my spine the rest of the day. Sometimes people say they are not afraid when they are and I think the Psalmist may have done the same.

The table of abundance prepared before the Psalmist is prepared not after the vanquishing of enemies, not at a safe distance from them, but in their presence – maybe even within 6 feet. They proclaim a sense of security ensured only by the rod and staff of the shepherding God. A rod and staff are not necessary when potential danger is not at hand. In fact, it is this interplay between providence and provision on one hand and danger and fear on the other that I think colors the entire Psalm. "*Even when* I am in the midst of the darkest valley," says the Psalmist, "I will not fear." At the moment when the fear is most real, darkest, most crippling I will *also* lean on my confidence in God. I don't think the Psalmist was absent of fear at all, but I also don't think it was bravado or a timid attempt to cover the fear that led them to claim as much. Sometimes to stand up under worry and anxiety and fear and declare, "I will not be afraid," is not a truth of the moment, but a proclamation of what is to come – a kind of creation process, a speaking into existence. Just as God said let there be light at the beginning of all time, so the Psalmist empowered by God says, "Let there be light," in the midst of the darkest valley. The Psalmist *creates* confidence *ex nihilo*, out of nothing; out of the absence of confidence, out of fear and worry and doubt – not vanquishing those, but adding a second reality to them.

With his words the Psalmist adds to whatever frightful reality must've driven them to write such a timeless piece the possibility of days ahead without want; a kind of abundance that shows up even in the midst of scarcity. They imagine in the midst of exhaustion lying down in green pastures, while lost being guided in right paths. We know very little of the 23rd Psalm historically, where it came from, what place it had in the lives of its earliest audiences, but I believe it was written in the midst of some time like the one we're in. Scarcity, exhaustion, confusion, and threat to both life and life as we know it were all around. There is no escaping a moment like that, nor is escapism a helpful response. Rather the Psalmist spoke into the world they knew as a way of opening up space.

We too can say in the midst of our anxiety, our worry, our fear, in the middle of a dark night, into our isolation and loneliness, our disorientation, and fatigue that we will not fear. By that we do not mean that we will never fret or lose a moment of sleep. We don't mean that we won't stress order take out and say we're

“supporting the economy”, we don’t mean that we won’t worry about the ones we love. We don’t even mean that we won’t worry about ourselves.

When we say we will not fear we mean simply that fear will not be all that we experience in this time and it will not win the day. We mean that we will hold space for the abundance of God to be made known even among empty shelves at the grocery store. We mean that we will speak into existence a world that overflows with goodness. We mean that we will banquet together (virtually if we must) even in the presence of a pandemic. We mean that we will find goodness and grant mercy every day, and that even when the quarantine is over we will never leave the house of the Lord. Even though we walk through the darkest valley, even though we don’t know where all this is going or how long it will last or who will be impacted in what ways, there will be a part of our lives – moments and places and encounters with others (from at least 6 feet away or by zoom or whatever) – that will be characterized by the joy and abundance of God. It is right and good that we be honest with ourselves that we are living in a scary time. It is good that we admit when we are afraid. It is also paradoxically good that we proclaim even in the darkness that we will not be afraid. Amen.