

When many of us think of comforting scripture, Psalm 23 often comes to mind. Psalm 23 is often read at funerals and memorial services, and we take comfort in the promises these words provide. God is my shepherd, I shall not want. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. What a gift these words, these images of who God is and what God does are for us, especially in times of grief.

Many of us are grieving right now in a lot of different ways. We grieve our pre-pandemic lives, being able to reasonably plan for goals and our future, and many of us grieve loved ones who have died recently. There are many days where we identify more with the valley of the shadow of death than we do green pastures, still waters, or an overflowing cup. Now more than ever, we are in need of a way to be comforted, uplifted, and guided on paths that restore our souls.

This need for comfort and guidance speaks to the very core, the very heart of what it is to be human. We have so very many needs, physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and in this time of pandemic, we have to find entirely new ways to have our needs met. Even the simple act of how we get our food, going to the grocery store, has changed. And there are deeper needs, of belonging and loving relationships and a sense of purpose that are so very necessary and difficult to have upended in this quick and unanticipated way. What we have learned and the guidance that we have followed for much of our lives is not necessarily how our lives are actually led these days. And in order to have our needs met, we need guidance on how to meet them.

This is what I love most about the image of God and Christ as our shepherd. Shepherds care for the entire lamb, and the entire flock. They tend to even the smallest details of wool and milking and all the needs of each individual lamb as well as the communal needs. They love and tend and guide the whole flock, and make time for each individual lamb within

the flock. They know the needs of the lambs and they guide them in meeting those needs.

And so God's shepherding of us works this way too - God knows what it is to be human in Christ Jesus, and guides us on paths that restore our souls. God knows that we have a deep need for love, care, and belonging, and these needs are exactly what God's promises are rooted in. God makes promises to us to lead us in love, to give us the gift of the Holy Spirit in the promises of baptism, the gift of the breath of life which connects us to the whole communion of saints. And in the promises of Holy Communion, we are connected to the entire body of Christ in the breaking of the bread, the new covenant in Christ's blood. God's shepherding leads us to God's love, in our individual lives and as the whole community in the body of Christ.

Much of our grieving and hardships right now are both on a communal level, a societal, cultural, worldwide level, and what it is to carry that hardship as an individual, what it means for each of us. And we need deep love and guidance to help us through. We need the love and comfort and assurance that God provides in His shepherding in love. We need to know that there is someone with us beyond just the darkest valleys in which we sit.

So here is the best news, the most powerful truth that we can ever hear in the midst of our hardships and our grief. The valley of the shadow of death is not the end of the story. The pit of Sheol is not the end of the story. The sealed tomb and grave of Jesus was not the end of that story, Christ's death on the cross is not the end of the story. Our valleys, pits, tombs, and deaths are not the end of our stories.

God is the end of our story. Hope and new life are the end of the story. God's redeeming love for the whole world is how this story ends. That is how it is for every single one of us. No matter what pit or valley or grave we find ourselves in, God is the shepherd who leads us out of it. Christ is our

loving shepherd, who reaches to us in these darkest moments, who knows what it is to be human and in the darkest and most painful places, physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally. Christ is our loving shepherd who does not belittle or demean our lives, but restores our souls. God leads us to still waters, to right paths for his sake. For his sake, God's sake is out of deep love for humanity. God loved all of us humans so very much that God gave His only son in death and new life so we may have life eternal. Life eternal, life abundantly. God's love for us is the path for his sake. God shepherds us out of deep love for us and knows, empathizes deeply with the pain of the human experience through the life and death of His Son, Jesus Christ. God is not our shepherd to belittle us, God is our shepherd in love for us.

There is life to be found in following God's shepherding in our lives. Christ is the gate for us, his beloved flock, to enter into the care and loving fold of his care. That love and care is always available to us - nothing we ever do, say, think, don't do, or feel will ever separate us from that love of God. But Christ is the gate. We must choose to go through that gate, and trust that the pasture on the other side of the gate is where light and new life are found. This trust is faith. Faith is trusting in the promises of light and new life that Christ brings to us.

We must repent from the darkness and pits and valleys we find ourselves in, turn away from these things that hold us captive out of fear, anxiety, or whatever else haunts and harms us, and follow the shepherding love of God, through Christ the gate.

It takes work and practice to choose the gate, to choose Christ and new life. Especially when we are in the midst of what challenges us, in the throes of whatever our darkest valley may be, making a conscious effort to choose Christ, to choose new life, is really hard. There are so many things that threaten and hold our spirits captive. Fear of the unknown. Anxiety about the future. Grief over cancelled plans or the death of people we love. Straight-up depression. Lack of precedence for how to deal with a

pandemic. Being lonely. Being unsure. Being exhausted. Just keeping ourselves and our families alive can be challenging these days.

But here is the gift, the good news in the midst of all of this pain. God loves us. God has already chosen us, over and over again, for all of time. God made covenant promises with our spiritual forebears that God will never abandon or forsake us. God in His Son Jesus Christ gave His life for all of humanity, choosing us, our redemption, our forgiveness, our grace, and our new life in that radical, world-changing, life-affirming, selfless, miraculous gift of Jesus Christ. God chooses us in every moment. God created us and the world we live in and God has called it good. God shepherds us out of love, out of the deep goodness and love and grace that God gives us every single day.

So it's not up to us to be good enough, strong enough, peppy or cheerful enough, or any other kind of enough that haunts us or holds us captive in our own personal pits and valleys. God has already claimed deep love and new life for each and every one of us. We need simply to show up and reach upwards, outwards in prayer and spiritual practices in order to get there. We need simply to follow the call of the voice of Christ which we know so deeply. That call, that voice of Jesus Christ is the same breath of life that is in every single one of us, the Holy Spirit that is the breath which makes us alive. We must simply listen and follow where that voice calls us. Following the loving shepherding of God, following this choice to love and give grace, leads us to new life. Life abundantly. Life saved by the grace and love of God. Life affirmed and risen from the graves that threaten us.

Death will never have the last word. God has the last word. Let us follow the voice of God, the love that shepherds us in Christ Jesus, and let us rest and rejoice in the new life it brings. Thanks be to God, Amen.