

Good evening everyone! And welcome to our last Wednesday Lent Mt. Zion-line worship video resource! As next week is Holy Week, we will not have worship on Wednesday, but we would love for you to tune into Facebook Live at 7pm for Maundy Thursday, next Thursday, April 9, and for Good Friday at 7pm next Friday, April 10. We look forward to worshipping with you live for those special and powerful services.

For tonight, I hope you enjoyed the first part of the Holden Evening Prayer liturgy, and thank you again to our very talented musicians at Mt. Zion for putting those videos together.. If you haven't watched the "Part 1" video of the Holden Evening Prayer yet, I would encourage you to go back and watch it! And once my sermon and scripture video here is complete, I would encourage you to watch the "Part 2" video to close out our last Wednesday Lent worship experience this evening.

Like many of you, I've been thinking about, answering, and dealing with a whole lot of new questions that I've never had to experience before. How do I run Facebook Live? How can we create Holy Week experiences while not in the church building? Which video editing software should I use? How can we make sure everyone in the church family has what they need? How many prepped meals can fit in my freezer? How long will we be in quarantine? And so on.

But I wonder what would happen if we just took a moment to slow down, breathe, and ask ourselves - "where is God in the midst of all this?". If we just stopped the rushing, stopped trying to overperform in the midst of uncertainty like we've been trained and affirmed to do for so very long. If we let go and let God in.

If we realized that the questions of how to care for ourselves and ways we need to tend to our well-being are actually not that difficult when it comes down to it. We are created by God and we belong to God.

God is surely present in all things, within us and all people, all places and times and ventures. But if we boil down all the things, it becomes much simpler. We are humans. Created as part of God's world, this very earth around us. The care for ourselves is simple, with food and water, fresh air and warmth, shelter and security, rest and relationships, purpose and prayer.

It's scary to admit you belong to God when that belonging ventures from what's usually only a spiritual realm to then your whole body and your whole existence. We are blessed beyond measure to live where we do, to live the lives we do, to have access and possibilities as vast and great and life-giving as we do. But even amidst this vastness and possibility, it all belongs to God. We don't always like talking about these things all belonging to God, because we like to have a sense of control over what we do. This is completely understandable and normal. But there are some things, we are learning, that even though we do our best, we cannot control. Our lives, our whole lives, belong to God. This whole earth, everything in it, everything that gives us meaning, time, place, or space belongs to God.

So rather than being afraid as we accept our lives belonging to God, giving up a certain degree of control, let's ask the God questions. Where is God in all of this? How is God working in a world completely disrupted and unsure and oftentimes stressful and scary?

Perhaps we can find God most in the ways our life now is different than it was before. Although I consider myself a prayerful person, I find myself praying and dwelling in God's Word much more now than I did before, and perhaps you do too. Perhaps we can find God in the time spent at home, realizing exactly who and what we have chosen to spend our life with, what our home consists of. We can find God in the people we connect with, albeit in new ways, but our relationships are growing stronger and more supportive every day. Maybe we can find God in the renewal of creation on such gorgeous display these days. The earth is renewing itself with the significantly decreased amount of pollution that's being put out these days. The spring green of the grass and trees is giving us radical hope amidst the unknown around it. We see more and more of our neighbors outside, playing, walking, bike riding, and connecting in new and loving ways, realizing we are all of us, amidst creation, the kingdom of God.

The other piece of belonging to God and letting go of some of this sense of control, is that we are affirmed for exactly who and where we are. We do not have to be perfect because God's love for us is what's really perfect. If we are struggling to balance all the added responsibilities in this time, of making sure our kids are on top of their schoolwork and taken care of, on top of doing our own jobs at home or out in essential services, of increased anxiety and the sheer exhaustion that comes from living through rapidly-changing expectations and collective trauma, of keeping everyone fed, well-rested, clean, and healthy, that is absolutely, 100% okay. If you are feeling overwhelmed or like you are not doing enough, know that you absolutely are doing enough and you are beloved for exactly right where and how you are. It's okay to be stressed or sad or tired or anything that you are feeling. Your worth as a human is not measured by how perfect your quarantine routine is, how "healthy" or not every meal is (shout out to my sister and her nacho-cheese corn dogs for dinner), if you've hit your step goal or weight goal or business goal or any other external thing. God loves you. Endlessly. We belong to a God who loves us and we do not need to be perfect. We can let go of the myth of perfection. We are all doing our best. We are all deeply loved. And we can all follow the loving guidance of God our holy shepherd.

When I struggle to see where God is, or forget to ask these God-centered questions, the three practices I rely on are prayer, scripture, and music. We've spent some time in music. We will spend some time in prayer later on in our service. Let's look at some scripture.

One of last week's assigned texts was Psalm 23, the classic, beautiful psalm of comfort for so many of us. And it truly is one of the greatest trust psalms we have, so I'm grateful for this opportunity to dwell in it and give it the time and consideration it needs in a separate sermon.

So let's now take some time to dwell in the words of Psalm 23.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

*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.*

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

The Word of the Lord.

It appears that every part of the psalm, every verse and phrase is directly related to what we are experiencing now. The trust in which King David had for our Lord God seems to saturate every sentence. And I wonder what it would look like if we were saturated by the same trust. What would pure trust and comfort in God look and feel like for you? In your body, and in your spirit?

We begin the psalm with proclaiming that God is my shepherd. God leads us, yes, but shepherding takes so much more than simply guiding our physical way. Shepherding involves deep care for the flock, tending to their wellbeing in food, water, shelter, their thick wool, and as God does so powerfully, in the midst of the 99, never leaving the one behind. God shepherds us and never leaves us behind.

"I shall not want" can also be translated as "I shall not be in need". God's shepherding includes this deep care, giving us all we need, in deep trust for our bodies, spirits, hearts, and minds. God gives us our daily bread, and the assuring promises of love and hope that we so desperately need.

God makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us to still waters. The world around us here in Hudson looks quite like green pastures and still waters. The grass is green and growing. The river is blue and flowing.

Although our darkest valley these days of uncertainty, anxiety, and a threat of illness may be prominent in our minds, we can be confident that God is truly with us. Oftentimes our darkest valleys are colored by grief, the loss of something or someone we love, which may be very much what we are experiencing now too. This comfort and trust amidst the shadows promised in this psalm is why we often hear it at funerals and memorial services too. Whatever our darkest valley might be, we need not have fear, we need simply to breathe, to do as best we can, to let ourselves be comforted by God's shepherding. God's rod and staff, God's tools for guiding and shepherding us along comfort us. All we need to do is the next best thing we can.

And our best is not exhausting ourselves to the point of a physical or mental breakdown. Our best is keeping ourselves alive, feeling our feelings, not letting the myth of perfection overtake our peace, and just taking things in small doses. Trusting in God's loving shepherding helps ground us in these things that are truly our best.

God prepares a table before us in the presence of enemies - what are our enemies now? For me it's often the negative thoughts of anxiety and depression that threaten my peace and I have to lean on the hope and love and abundance of God to overcome them. For many the enemy is the unknown, the new and frightening, the rapidness of change, the illness that threatens us, the feelings of isolation that trap us, or any other thing that prevents us from living in a way of peace and love for God and our neighbors.

In the midst of these enemies, God anoints us with oil and makes sure our cups overflow. God sees us, sets us apart with anointing, and gives us the promises of abundant life. Abundant life is found in Christ Jesus, who took on all sin and death, the enemies of our peace, and died for our sake. Christ rose again in new life so we may have that life and have it abundantly. For as long as God has been with humanity, so God will provide new and abundant life for us. And we shall dwell in that place and love of God our whole lives long. The goodness and mercy of God will journey with us and always guide us no matter what crosses our paths. God is always within and amongst us and creation. For all the days of our lives, we will dwell with our God of life, love, and peace which surpasses all understanding. Thanks be to God, Amen.

And as we end our time dwelling in these familiar, comforting words of trust, I invite you to join in me in prayer together as we pray more familiar words, the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.

May peace be with you all dear brothers and sisters. Amen.