

“In the Valley of Darkness” © Ellen Clark Clémot - 2020

A Sermon by Rev. Ellen Clark Clémot – Interim Pastor/Head of Staff

Preached on Facebook Live for the Larchmont Avenue Church, Larchmont, New York

Date: March 22, 2020, 10a.m. – Fourth Sunday in Lent

Text: Psalm 23

Theme: Even in our darkest days, God comforts and protects us. The Lord serves as both our shepherd and our host, showering us with God’s ever-lasting love, and an abiding peace that carries us home.

Extravagant God, you are the source of our strength and the provider of our care. Help us hear your message for our lives this morning, that we might believe in you afresh, and find our souls restored and our hearts encouraged by your love, as we humble ourselves to accept your guidance and your care.

Now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.”

Was it just a week ago that we reflected on the Wilderness, and the need to never linger there? “Keep moving,” was the message – “don’t stop now.” A dark wilderness valley is a dangerous place. We need to get through it. But it can take a while to traverse.

The dangerous thing about dark valleys, in the ancient world of the psalmist, is the vulnerability of travelers walking there. Ancient travelers sought out valleys for ease of walking across a level plain. But the dark valley, narrower and obscured in shadow when the sun drops below the surrounding hillsides, was especially dangerous. The enemy hid in the hills above, ready to plunge down upon any traveling band and rob them of their goods, and their lives. The darkest valleys were the most frightening. Everyone was vulnerable and exposed. Like us today in this dark valley of pandemic.

Just as we should not stop in the wilderness to set up camp in a place of anxiety and fear, but instead, keep on moving, there’s something significant going on in this dark valley. The Psalmist tells us what it is: The Lord is our shepherd. It may not sound like much. It’s not a vaccine, or a cure. It won’t keep us from falling ill. But the Lord travels with us, like a Shepherd lives with his flock. Trusting in God’s Love soothes our anxious souls. God brings comfort to those who trust in God’s providence. Jesus calls us to come to him, all who are weary. He will lighten our burdens and give us rest. We sing together: Give up your burdens to God. The quiet confidence we place in Jesus Christ saves us from our mental anguish. Peace I bring to you.

The Lord does not prevent our entering into those dark valleys. But the Lord our God, always, without fail, walks right alongside us when we enter there. The Lord is our shepherd, never abandoning us to the dangers of the world.

So, the first take away of this morning’s message, is to remember that God walks with us, no matter how bleak things get, no matter where we find ourselves in two weeks or two months. God will not abandon us in the darkest valleys of our lives. But we need to remember not to

linger in those dark places. Even in the midst of a pandemic, we still need to go out for a walk and get some fresh air, but keep at a distance from others of at least six feet. We need to keep moving, knowing that God is at our side – equipping us through scripture and our community of faith with the wisdom to help us through our most challenging days.

This pandemic and the virus at its core may be, for many of us, the darkest season we have ever faced. Lent has taken on an added grimness this year. People are dying. The virus can no longer be contained. Our valley is dark. I think of it as the beginning of World War III. It's an attack at a cellular level that may bring more nations to their knees than any human military conflict ever could.

We've already seen our businesses destroyed, restaurants and hotels closed, hourly workers being laid off in droves, three years of market gains wiped out in three weeks. It's Sunday morning, the Lord's Day, and I'm preaching to you over internet. And you can comment back.

I was trying to make sense of this surreal time by comparing it to some other disaster we've experienced in our lifetimes. But is there anything like it? Maybe the Ebola outbreak in Africa, or SARS, or even HIV-AIDS? For me, the closest I have come to feeling so personally vulnerable is remembering the early hours and days after the 9/11 terrorist attack. There was a surreal quality about life then too. Airplanes used for missiles, the Twin Towers destroyed, and the Pentagon riven in two.

If you lived or worked in Manhattan then, you will remember the early hours of fear – the nation-wide shutdown of the skies while we wondered if there were more planes coming, more attacks, bombings perhaps. And then the grim reality of what happened set in with each new day, more missing people, more stories about their tragic deaths.

I remember how all the churches up and down Park Avenue had their doors open wide with priests and pastors welcoming any passerby to come in, to sit down and pray, reflect, talk to someone, or simply to sit in a pew and cry. It's one of the greatest frustrations for me today – that we cannot open our church doors and meet together, that we cannot gather, and hug one another, be together as one physical body in Christ. But we are trying to be together this morning, in our tele-connected, virtual way. It is a start, and a reminder, that we are one in Christ, and we care enough to be present for each other, as one church family.

Of course, 9/11 was a different kind of fear. Once we confirmed that there were no more attackers, we could begin to build our lives again. Our rattled nerves healed over time. We were edgy, I remember, and despondent over all the loss of life – nearly 3,000 people killed in one brief morning on a beautiful September day. But then it was over. Then we could work on healing, and regrouping, on searching for the missing and finding them. We set about rebuilding our markets, our businesses, and our lives. We recovered, but it took a long time.

Somehow, this valley, this corona virus valley, seems deeper, and darker, because there is no end in sight. The deaths from the virus are only now beginning to ramp up – first tens, then hundreds, now thousands. We know there will probably be millions of mortalities nation-wide. And there is nothing we can do but wait, and wonder: who will be next? And when will it end?

This long, lonely valley of ours is especially dark because the enemy is an invisible virus. We can slow it, but not stop it. FEMA has declared New York a major disaster zone.

All non-essential businesses are shuttered. Courage to all who are working in the essential ones, facing the public and risking contamination everyday: our healthcare workers, grocery clerks, sanitation workers and first responders. Thank you for protecting us, keeping the grocery shelves stocked, helping us cope. I have been trying to imagine what it would be like for us if we end up having to ration food, or go without things – not for a week or two, but for years. Already the governor has commandeered clothing factories to begin making face masks for healthcare workers, our supply now exhausted. They will provide one million masks for New York City.

We are on wartime emergency footing. Do we have the mental strength of our forbears, that silent generation, who survived so much hardship and set the tone in our families by scrimping and saving and always planning for the next bank run, or market crash, or food shortage? We will be strong if we walk with our Shepherd.

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The 23rd Psalm is a psalm of comfort and a psalm of hope. It is the one psalm you want to be sure to take with you when you embark on a wilderness journey, as we now have. Psalm 23 is a first-person narrative that should become our own – showing profound trust in God who provides for our every need, not just grocery items at check-out, but the luxury of a green meadow and cool streams of fresh water to drink. Our Lord, the Good Shepherd, offers us a deep peacefulness - enough to restore our anxious souls, even in the darkest valley.

The psalmist moves from praising God the protector to gratefulness to God the provider and host at the table. The psalmist recognizes that ours is a God who subdues all enemies with peacefulness. Could we see the enemy pacified as the virus struck harmless by a vaccine? – or overwhelmed by God's people who develop immunity for the all by illness and recovery?

We may face the Valley of Darkness, but we need not fear. Faith in God can help us manage our mental stress. Prayer to God, deep reflection on scriptures, Christ's gift of hope, can restore our souls, a mental peace-of-mind.

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There's more Good News for us – a second take-away I wanted to share with you this morning and every time you read this 23rd Psalm. It's the ending. The words the Psalmist chose to explain the goodness and mercy of God who accompanies us into and out of every valley, even the darkest ones. The final verse reads:

*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.*

In our translation, and in every popular English translation I searched, the King James, the New International Version, the familiar NRSV, God's goodness and mercy are described as "following" the psalmist. But that's not what the original Hebrew says.

Psalm 23 in Hebrew says something more. It promises that the goodness and mercy of the Lord shall *pursue* us, not follow us, but rather *track us down* and *chase after us* all of our days.

God's love for us does not merely follow, holding back in the shadows, taking its own time, or completely absent when we need it most. God's love and kindness, God's mercy and goodness, accompany us into the darkest valley, and if we stray, or get scared, and run away, God's goodness is going to chase after us like a parent until we're safely home. God will outrun our fears and restore our courage, restore our strength, and restore our souls.

Do we have anything to be afraid of? Yes, we do. We are afraid for our lives. But God is with us, our shepherd and provider, our comfort and our strength.

God's goodness guides us forward. God's love holds us close. Christ's compassion gathers us in. We find our refuge in the loving arms of the Lord, our Shepherd, who leads us safely out of the darkest valleys and into the bright promise of a brand-new day.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.