

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶Surely 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.

Today we conclude our 4 week preaching series on "FEAR NOT!"...

Fear Not! God's doing a new thing!

Fear Not! Flammable faith is igniting all around us by the HS's power!

Fear Not! Love wins because God's got us in and through the saving, perfect love of Jesus Christ!

So we can claim and raise our voices—We will "Fear Not!"

But this is hard...isn't it? While we are gathering back in person at our 2 worship services. There are still many who aren't comfortable being here in person; Lots of friends and family and guests watch virtually. So it still remains another year of being separated in many ways as the unique body of Christ at First Church.

This day we pause in our week to worship in person and online, and open ourselves yet again to be touched by God's Word while acknowledging that **its hard...**

- Its hard to release our fears...
- Its hard to trust God's new thing...
- Its hard to keep the flame burning or even to find a spark sometimes

Its hard, because its not the same...and as we all know 17 months into the Pandemic, our opportunity to be together as a family of faith, to grieve TOGETHER, to be physically together—to remember and laugh and cry and simply hug each other...has been another significant loss for far too long...another dark valley to find ourselves wandering through...to use the psalmist's imagery.

For me this has been hard because I have been walking through my own set of personal valleys. I've shared this at our meet and greet with church members throughout the month—that at different times over this past

year I have felt a bit adrift, even lost during this season of unprecedented loss and change, of endings and far too many deaths.

~A year ago this month I lost a dear friend and cabinet colleague Rev. Myrna Bethke. She had a stroke and was gone in less than 3 weeks. Myrna was healthy and a vibrant light as Dean of the Cabinet, It was a shock and so devastating and painful for so many reasons...none of us could be with her to lay hands on her and pray over her, to share our love through stories, to just be physically present with her, even amidst her inability to speak or respond while in the hospital and then in hospice care. We couldn't hug her grieving husband...or even each other as a cabinet team. It was hard.

~I learned last summer that my dad lost his wife, who was in a nursing home, to COVID. He wasn't allowed to be with her for comfort and assurance, to say goodbye. So sad...and painful...

~Leading as a District Superintendent of 58 churches, I tried to help church leaders and pastors pivot on a dime to continue to be the church of Jesus Christ to their communities and each other when the entire world shut down because of the pandemic. There's no blueprint on how to lead during a time such as this my friends. Some smaller churches never recovered & closed this year in our conference...I know there will be more

~I lost 5 mos of holding & snuggling & playing with our 1st granddaughter, Abby changed so much...and ZOOM and FaceTime isn't the same. Oh there have been some deep, dark valley wanderings for my souls my friends.

And yet...the Psalmist David reminds me—"Even though I walk through the darkest valley...Even the valley of the shadow of death...I will fear not...But its SO hard...

Maybe you have felt this way...or perhaps are experiencing such losses right now? Trudging along...just trying to find your way? This week alone, many members of the church have shared with me. The pain of so many losses this past year, And those grieving the death of a loved one.

Teachers, nurses, doctors, psychologists, social workers are desperately dealing with students, parents, families & communities, struggling to find healthy balance and stability amidst the past 17 mos of chaos, fear and uncertainty.

We are overtaxed and exhausted—many are struggling with anxiety and depression, and we hear this week's report that COVID-19 has claimed over 8000 more deaths globally. Many of us are wandering through deep, dark valleys...just spent...amen? Its so hard...God KNOWS it's hard...

AND YET...and yet...we are reminded that "Even though I walk through the darkest valley...I will fear no evil... WHY? Because YOU are with me O God...The 23rd Psalm has been balm for my soul as I mourn so many losses.

The beauty and gift and transformative power of the Psalms is that they have the marvelous capacity of **BECOMING the voice** of those who read and sing and pray them. The Psalms name truth from the deep, deep places of the soul; Of often hidden, unspoken places of our mind and spirit.

Friends, the 23rd Psalm has become MY truth, MY words, MY voice of healing in the midst of pain, comfort in the face of loss and peace during times of deep grief. Today I invite you to let the 23rd Psalm become YOUR voice, as you reflect upon and think about your valley moments.

Perhaps today you will reflect upon the names of beloved ones— whose deaths have created valleys of empty, dark, lost spaces that have been & continue to be incredibly difficult to navigate. *Amen?*

Or perhaps your loss is not worshipping together on Saturday nights or at the 8:30am Sunday chapel service; or you mourn the loss of your previous pastors or your last church family—these can be just as profound a loss, as the death of a loved one.

As can our students who have lost academic continuity, clubs, sports, and fellowship time that the school year brings. Families who had to navigate careers, virtual learning from home and isolation from support structures when they've needed them the most...

All valleys of empty, dark and lost spaces and times in our lives...That can be so difficult to navigate and find one's way through...AND YET...Even though I walk through the darkest valley—Over and over again...Even though YOU walk through the darkest valleys—WE will fear no evil...WHY? Because YOU, O God are with us each and every step of the way!

The 23rd Psalm has become my mantra—"Gina—FEAR NOT!" I will fear no THING—no evil, no loss, no pain, no valley moments, no separation, no absence of loved ones...I will FEAR NOT—because my Good Shepherd keeps telling me—"I've got you Gina. I will lead you and restore you and comfort you. I prepare for your needs, anoint you with over-flowing blessing. I follow you every step of the way—intimately we dwell together...ALWAYS...not just sometimes...Always! I GOT YOU Gina!"

You know its so cool to dig into the Word of God and see that even the structure of the Psalms makes it come alive...that transformative power I spoke of. There's this amazing shift that happens in the middle of the 23rd psalm.

At the beginning of Ps 23 David describes God, telling us who God is.

The Lord is my shepherd.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside quiet waters.

He refreshes me.

He guides me.

David is talking ABOUT God...right? HE...he...he...But when David gets to his valley wandering in vs 4... he changes from talking ABOUT God and starts talking TO God.

Check this out:

You are with me.

Your rod and staff comfort me.

You prepare a table for me.

You anoint my head.

Your goodness and love will follow me.

The shift of "he" to "You" is powerful and transformational.

My colleague and author Rev. Junius Dotson put it this way: "On the mountaintop, its easier to talk **about** God, isn't it? We shout out that the Lord is good. The Lord has done this for me! But when we find ourselves in the valley, we come face-to-face with God, and our language shifts. We need an intimacy with God deeper than we've known before. We need to rehearse to ourselves and say out loud to God—

'You are with me, God.
You comfort me, God.
You defend me, God.
You bless me, God'

This is how we take each step through the valley. (*Soul Reset, Junius Dotson, p 18*)

The 23rd Psalm tells us why we should fear not AND Shows us how to fear not. To all grieving the loss of a beloved one today, To all grieving the loss of time and work, of family gatherings, of school and time with friends, of postponed vacations, of church family and even dinner out on the town—To all who are simply exhausted and spent by your valley wanderings, May you BECOME the voice of the 23rd Psalm—As you and I...trust and believe that God is with us...Amidst deep, dark valley wanderings...

AND claim the voice saying...each of you saying boldly...I FEAR NOT because—The Lord is MY Shepherd...I shall not want...because YOU O God—

- Will make me lie down and rest in safe places
- You will lead me to nourishment of mind, body and spirit
- You will restore my soul
- You will lead me in ways that are right for me...uniquely...personally
Because you O God, know what comforts me
- You revive my drooping head and heart, my cup brims with blessing
- Your beauty and love chase after me along every path I walk,
Or run or stumble through

I FEAR NOT...because I know I'm always back home in the House of God for the rest of my life. We FEAR NOT on this day of remembering and naming so many losses because we know and trust that all our beloved ones who have died have indeed been welcomed home; and now dwell in the House of the Lord Forever.

We FEAR NOT because every valley moment is alive with hidden, holy presence, and that nothing, nothing is ever lost or forgotten or wasted. As the voice of the Good Shepherd calls continually...May the deep well of grief and pain, of loss and exhaustion turn into a seamless flow of Holy presence, Where our cups brim with blessing...As we are embraced by our loving God— in whom dawn and twilight are one revealing new Light within the darkness places...and new paths of possibility to travel upon...

May we FEAR NOT and BECOME the voice of hope, peace, and life To all we meet. Amen and amen.