

“MENUCHA”
Lent 4 | Psalm 23
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Prerecorded and available on YouTube

A congregant sent me an article this week from *The Babylon Bee*, an online news satire website. Here’s a portion of what was posted on March 18: “The CDC now recommends for everyone to stay home and avoid going out as much as possible. Despite this, reports are that God is breaking quarantine and going absolutely everywhere.

Hospitals, nursing homes, prisons -- wherever He is needed, God is going. He is reportedly visiting everyone and checking on everyone in this time of need and not using any amount of social distancing. God is said to be following the absolute best practices, though, and is at no risk of making people sick but only making people better.” (*The Babylon Bee*, March 18, 2020)

God knows, we all need a bit of humor right now in the age of the coronavirus.

But there’s no denying it – we are living in times of great uncertainty and peril, and in times like these, human beings like familiarity and certainty. Fortunately for us, **Psalm 23** is the lectionary reading for this weekend. It’s one of the most beloved and well-known Psalms in all of history. AND, it’s a Psalm which has been used throughout the life of faith to soothe people in times of anxiety, grief and loss. It tells us, no matter what is happening, God is here with us and refuses to leave no matter what! That’s a message we all need to hear right now.

Indeed, we are a people of faith. And that faith is not based on some whimsical knowledge or subjective experience. We are people who have connected to the story of a people who have long followed God—for millennia. That’s an important perspective, because if we zoom out and look at the larger context of how God has responded to God’s people throughout history, it gives us further encouragement of God’s faithfulness in good times as well as difficult ones, such as those we are experiencing now. **Our collective story of faith is a story we need to be telling right**

now in these days of the coronavirus – when people are facing isolation and quarantine. **We are called to remember that we are not alone!**

Our story of faith reminds us that we are and always have been a wandering people. The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for over 400 years after the exodus from Egypt. Sure, they had their periods of grumbling when the vision of the future was slow to come, and they couldn't see the path forward, but God assured them through their leaders, through each other and thorough tangible provision (manna in the wilderness) that they were not alone and that God had not and would never abandon them.

As we look at this particular Psalm, We are not sure what circumstances the writer is addressing or why the people needed such reassurance at that time. But the words are those with which we can all relate, can't we? We've all had times in our lives when we felt we were in the valley of the shadow of death. When life seemed hopeless or we felt utterly alone and panicked and we didn't know how things would turn out.

In **Psalm 23**, the writer reminds us that God sustains, provides, and cares for God's very own not once, but time and time again – when they fled out from bondage in Egypt, and wandered. When they returned from Exile, and continued on as a people... even to this day, they were led by God. **Psalm 23** reminds us that goodness can pursue us in the good times as well as in times of sorrow and pain. Moreover, in this Lenten season, Psalm 23 serves as a reminder that even when we live in the face of danger and misfortune, even in the shadows of darkness that might surround us, we will be sustained.

Some of you may know that I was supposed to be away this past week in Portland Oregon for a conference on the topic of what it means to be the church in transition. All churches are in transition. Two weeks ago, I cancelled my trip, foreseeing what may and has inevitably come to pass. The conference was to be held at the Menucha Center. Interesting name. It was just this week, that I learned what that word means... and that it comes from **Psalm 23**.

Verses 2-3 of the Psalm says, He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. This week, the leaders of the Menucha Center said that the word, for which their center is named, is Hebrew and is used in the Psalm for the word "still" and is meant to convey a sense of "rebuilding," "renewing," or "restoring." So... we may say God

leads you/me beside renewing, rebuilding and restoring waters~~God restores your/my soul.

The lessons we are being handed right now – of opportunities to stop and look and be still and face all that we normally hide from in our busy lives. So we might ask ourselves, “How are you allowing God to renew, restore and rebuild your soul in the midst of these times of isolation and uncertainty? How will you let God use this time to move and change you?

I came across this story online from *The Mentor Channel* about Franz Kafka, the Jewish novelist who was from Prague in the Czech Republic. He wrote about the human struggle and quest for security. The story goes this way:

At forty, Franz Kafka, who had no children, was walking through the park in Berlin when he met a girl who was crying because she had lost her favorite doll. She and Kafka searched for the doll unsuccessfully. Kafka told her to meet him there the next day and they would come back to look for her doll.

The next day, when they had not yet found the doll, Kafka gave the girl a letter 'written' by the doll saying, "Please don't cry. I took a trip to see the world. I will write to you about my adventures."

Thus began a story which continued until the end of Kafka's life. During their meetings, Kafka read the letters carefully “written” by the doll describing adventures and conversations that the girl found adorable.

Finally, Kafka brought back the doll that had returned to Berlin. (It was really a doll which he bought). "It doesn't look like my doll at all," said the girl. Kafka handed her another letter in which the doll had written: "My travels have changed me." The little girl hugged the new doll and took her home, happy. A year later Kafka died.

The story goes, many years later, the now-adult girl found a letter inside the doll. In the tiny letter, signed by Kafka, it said, "Everything you love will probably be lost, but in the end, love will return in another way." (The Mentor Channel)

Right now, we are living in a time when we may have lost, or feel like we have lost a great deal: loss of our sense of physical safety and freedom to move and congregate as we wish; the loss of dreams; the loss of a sense of freedom of

autonomy; for some loss of financial security either through job loss or investments.

But friends... even though we may feel we are walking through the deepest valleys, God is still with us, working to restore us, renew us and rebuild us as we are lead in paths of righteousness; God is there to comfort us co to comfort us, to anoint us and to provide for us.

We are in a time of what is called “liminal space”... when the lines between the spiritual world and the physical world are thin. Our sensitivities are heightened. Add to that, we are in the season of Lent, when we are asked to examine our lives and to discern the movement of God in our lives and allow God draw closer.

We will be changed by this experience. There’s no doubt. We’ll be changed as individuals and as a people on this earth. The question is... how will we experience the Spirit of the loving God move, to restore, renew and rebuild us?

God is here. God is moving... May we be open.

Alleluia! Amen!