

Holding Comfort (Psalm 23)

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Date: 28 October 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon. I welcome you to my family room this afternoon. It's a place that's warm and comforting. It's a place where I come at the end of the day sometimes to curl up on the couch with a book and a blanket, sometimes to watch TV or to listen to music. It's the one room in the house that is especially comforting. I love to be in the kitchen. I love to cook and bake. But when I'm home and the day ends and I've done all that I can do, this is the place I come to be peaceful. And in the morning, this is the place I come with my coffee and a blanket. And I read scripture and I pray for you and for so many in this world. It helps me to do that from a place that is also comforting to me.

I was thinking that this week, when the tensions around us have gone up and up and up, that we all need to find our family room space. We all need to find whatever that is, the way that we connect with God and connect with others or simply take time and space for ourselves.

I was reminded as I was thinking about meeting with you this afternoon and what is it that the world needs? I wish that I could answer not only the question as to what the world needs, but what would make the world a better place that is so beyond my humble, very human abilities.

I know over the years, some of the things that have brought people comfort, that have reminded people, God is here. God is with us. God will not abandon us because God gave us life and God promised in the scriptures.

God is here. God bless you. I have a lot of compassion for others. And I reminded of the chapter in the Psalms that has brought people reassurance, generation after generation after generation.

[2 : 3 9] And I found myself returning to it. Not only returning to this Psalm, the 23rd Psalm, but returning to it In this Bible, this is the Bible of my earliest interest in Christianity and in Scripture.

And let me just tell you, it wasn't my Bible. It was left behind by my brother who had gotten it from Confirmation, which must have happened in a brief time where my parents thought Confirmation was a good idea.

And he didn't care to have the Bible at that time. And I discovered it and claimed it as the Bible that then I would carry with me through this journey of faith.

And it's water-stained. And the pages, some of them don't have their red lining or border anymore.

The binding is worn. It could be convinced to fall apart at some point, but I'm going to avoid that. It's clearly a well-made Bible.

[3 : 5 2] And there's comfort in that. There's comfort in going back to something that has been with me for so many years. Maybe you have a Bible or something that you can put with you or next to you.

I have an afghan that was made by my grandmother over the chair behind me. And it always feels so wonderful to wrap it around and feel comforted both by the blanket and by the memory of a wonderful grandmother.

This weekend is All Saints Day, and it's particularly a time when we're mindful of those people who have made such a difference in our lives.

And so I think that this psalm, which has comforted generations and generations, is a good thing for us to share today.

The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters.

[5 : 02] He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. And yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.

For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointest 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 forever. It's such reassurance that God spoke a word to David so many, many hundreds of years ago.

Thousands. And yet it's a word that still comforts us. Because it reminds us, no matter what has changed, no matter what is changed, and no matter what will possibly not be the same, God promises.

The Lord is our shepherd. And we may experience suffering and loss. We may live in a time of fear and anxiety and uncertainty.

[6 : 33] And yet, the Bible says, I shall not want. Want for what? We shall not want for a God who cares for us.

Never, ever will there not be a God who cares for us and who will be a shepherd to us. And that shepherding was shown to us in Jesus, who became a new kind of a shepherd.

God is the reassurance because God leads us not only beside the still waters that are calm and soothing, but also will restore our souls in times when maybe the water isn't calm, when maybe the streams are not still.

And maybe we do become fearful of things that are so big out in the world. But this psalm reminds us that God is with us.

Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. And thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.

[7 : 49] Now, David had enemies. Most of us don't have those kinds of enemies. Most of us are not in fear for our physical life and well-being on a regular basis.

Some may be. So how is it that God prepares a table? God feeds us. Sometimes it's not the food that I might prepare in my kitchen, the comfort food that might be so good for you and your heart and your spirit.

Sometimes it might be communion, even taken from a little cup with a gluten-free cracker and grape juice.

A table prepared to remind us that not only did God say that he would be our shepherd, he sent his son Jesus to show us a way of love and reconciliation and peace and forgiveness and eternal life.

That's quite a table. That's quite a table.

[9 : 31] How in the midst of all of this, they seem easy. And maybe don't take the time to name the fact that as we approach All Saints Day, we are reminded of those we have lost.

The reminder that as we live in a contentious time in this country and in this world. And we don't often know what the right answer is.

And so I don't have easy answers. I do have sustaining thoughts.

And that is to go back to that which has comforted you in your faith all your life. We've all been through hard times before through conflict and uncertainty.

And some have endured storms of the physical kind. And we all have endured storms of relationships and home and family and work.

[10 : 44] What has sustained you? What's gotten you through it? Is it just your own brute gut strength of perseverance and toughness?

Toughness? That's at least a part of it for many. Too stubborn to be defeated. And yet we have seen as even the biggest and the toughest have fallen in many ways.

So even those of us who have been stubborn and independent and accomplished things just by sheer determination, We hang on to that.

And yet we also return to scripture and faith and the things that have reminded us that God is here.

God will always be here. Sometimes we struggle to see where is God? And why doesn't God just fix all the problems?

[11 : 56] That's a hard question. And often leaves us distraught, disappointed, uncertain.

And so again, the invitation is to go to the family room space of your heart and your faith.

The scripture that sustains you, the Bible stories that you were taught and told when you were new in your faith. I remember struggling about not knowing who Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were.

And you know, I've known who they are for a long time now. And I use that as an example of not knowing the Bible. And there's a lot of value in their story.

And yet that is not one of the stories that I hold on to as an anchor in my faith. The anchors in my faith are the people who persevered and who broke down and gave up.

[13 : 04] And God came and found them and breathed life and encouragement, sometimes made sure bread or water was delivered.

My heroes in the Bible are the people that had the courage to come near to Jesus with their brokenness. And be honest.

Remember a woman who came to him and touched the hem of his garment and was healed. Maybe one of the reasons she's my hero is because that was so wrong in the era in which she lived.

She had no right to approach a man, let alone Jesus, and definitely not to touch them when she was sick. And her desperation, she simply wanted to keep believing.

Keep believing that there was hope, that there was healing, that there was a future for her of some kind. And that there was a future for her of some kind.

[14 : 36] And that there was a future for her of some kind.

I think that there was a future for her of some kind. I think that's why we go back to those stories so often. That's why we teach our children about Noah and the ark.

Because it's such a great story that they can remember forever and ever. That Noah saved all of the animals. And that they came to a new land.

And God showed them a new way and put a rainbow in the sky as a sign of a promise. That he would not destroy the people again.

And yet, I think, we talk about Job and Jonah and their trials and tribulations. And yet, I think some of the reason we go back to those stories is because their faith, sometimes it wavered, sometimes they doubted.

[16 : 01] And yet, it came back to them time after time, their faith. And they believed. And so my hope and my prayer this afternoon is that we will look to Scripture for those things that give us comfort and remind us of God's presence.

That we will look to the things, yes, things, that are part of our story, faith or life, that remind us of who has comforted us and encouraged us, strengthened us, reminded us of who we are, sent us back on the right path, or helped us to persevere on the path that we knew was right from the beginning.

Let's remember those saints in your life. Let's remember how it is that God brought these people into our lives to tell us the story of relentless pursuit and relentless love and relentless salvation.

Nothing can take that away from us. Nothing. Nothing. And I hope that we can be mindful of that today, that good day, bad day, good relationships, troubled relationships, surrounded by love or all alone in your family room.

There is nothing. The Bible tells us in Romans, nothing that will ever separate you or me from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

[17 : 48] So let us be comforted. Let us be reassured. And let us be reminded. Let's pray. Lord, we pray that we can give the world into your keeping, that we can give this next week into your keeping, and maybe let go of our thought of how it has to be.

Lord, instead, show us your way. Guide us in ways of encouragement and strength and perseverance.

Help us to remember. Remember the ones who held us when we were little, encouraged us in the middle, and maybe gave us a shove or two to get us on the right path, or maybe came looking for us when we were lost.

remind us of where they brought us back to you, back to what's true and real and good. Let it be so, and I know it will be, Lord, and yet I ask, could you please just remind us in the things we hold, in the blankets we wrap, in the loved ones' faces we see.

Remind us of your steadfast presence and assurance. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.