

Virginia Synod Resource Sermon: October 11: Gospel Reading and Sermon by The Rev. Anne Jones Martin for Pentecost 19a
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMcwsfkX1C4&feature=youtu.be>

Opening

- Share cab driver story

In a New York City cab driver sort of way, I think that driver embodied Paul's instruction, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." I don't know what prompted the driver to be patient and generous with his time. Maybe it was his faith, maybe it was a reflection of God's image pouring out of him, maybe he was just in a good mood. But it came at the right time for this woman. She needed to experience grace that day and be reminded that even in the valleys, the hard spots of life, God is with us.

I suspect that cab ride was one of the longest more **disorienting** journeys of the woman's life. She had packed up her home and said goodbye to her possessions except what was packed in her suitcase. She had come to terms with a major decision in her life, one that comes with numerous losses, and perhaps she couldn't imagine there would be a gift in all this change and uncertainty of what was ahead of her. I like to think that in and through the cab driver, she experienced God's mercy and goodness. **In his gift to her there was reason to rejoice and strength enough to take the steps required to walk into the nursing home and keep on living, in a new way. In some ways, we might say that cab driver was the woman's shepherd through the transition from residential, independent living to the nursing home.**

Psalm 23

At Christ Lutheran in Fredericksburg, where I serve as Pastor, our at home Sunday school classes are focusing on God as shepherd during the month of October, and so I'm going to focus today's sermon on the 23rd Psalm, which is the Psalm appointed for Sunday. I believe Psalm 23 has a good word we need to hear proclaimed to us right now in *the disorienting experience of living through a pandemic*.

I just finished reading a book on the Psalms by Walter Brueggemann called the Message of the Psalms. It's an older work of Brueggemann's. In the book, he categorizes the Psalms into three movements: orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.

Psalms of orientation explained

Psalms of disorientation explained

Psalms of reorientation explained

When we look at Psalm 23, we can see all three movements in the single Psalm.

1. From its opening proclamation, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” we are invited to praise God for God’s faithfulness and goodness in our lives. The Lord is the one who provides us with green pastures to rest and calm waters to drink from, he restore our souls. We see a metaphor for the sacramental gifts of the church the green pastures and waters of Psalm 23.
2. And then, just as in life, without warning, we find ourselves **disoriented** and standing in a valley. And not just any valley, but the valley of death. In the valley we are struggle with the uncertainty of what it is next. If we understand that the valley of the shadow of death can actually be any of life’s struggles then this psalm becomes psalm for the living that we pray our whole lives long in the face of individual danger and communal uncertainty.

So I want you to think back to early March, we were just moving right along, all seemed pretty unremarkable and normal. And then suddenly, the world and our worlds, our congregational lives, quickly became **disoriented**. We were going about our usual routines, waking up, dropping our kids off at school, going to the office, volunteering, going to worship on Sundays followed by potluck dinners in the fellowship hall. And then, it all changed with the news of a never before seen virus.

And ever since March, we’ve been traveling through a season of disorientation. We’re suffering from a loss of our usual rhythms and schedules, the loss of control and a heightened sense of uncertainty, and the loss of so many lives. But even in this shared valley and despite the real and present dangers in our world, the uncertainty that characterizes an election year, we join the psalmist in expressing our trust in God’s presence using the words, “for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me.” Yes, this is a disorienting and troubling time, but it’s not the end our story. Things will not always be as they are today.

3. We have the good news that in the face of uncertainty and chaos, God is with us acting to save us. God is setting a table for us in the presence of enemies, and pursuing us with goodness and mercy. God’s mercy is chasing after us right now. And God’s persistent movement toward us leads the Psalmist and us to announce, “surely I will dwell in the house of the lord forever.”

There’s something both hopeful and honest about naming the movement from orientation, to disorientation, to reorientation, in Psalm 23. The psalm ends with that proclamation of dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. We usually think about the heavenly courts when we hear that line, but now I just imagine the joy of what it will be like when we’re

able to gather together for worship and fill our sanctuaries with singing once again, to sit shoulder to shoulder with our church family and exchange Christ's peace freely, and before that thought fades away, I'm reminded of how God is pursuing us right now in the gift of our gathering virtually in this moment, *and how God is calling us right now to fix our eyes and hearts on Him. ////*

In the book *A Turtle on the Fenceline*, Allen C. Emery tells about a night he slept on the Texas plains with a shepherd who was watching 2,000 sheep. They made a bonfire to cook dinner over and keep themselves warm. Not long into the night, Emery heard the unmistakable wail of coyotes. The shepherd jumped up and tossed logs on the fire and looked across the plain. When Emery looked out on the plain filled with the sheep, he saw thousands of little lights. He writes, "I realized that these were the reflections of the fire in the eyes of the sheep. In the midst of danger, the sheep were not looking out into the darkness, but were keeping their eyes set toward the shepherd (Dynamic Preaching Vol. XXXIV, No. 3).

When we are afraid of the coyotes in our lives, we have a Good Shepherd to fix our eyes upon. Psalm 23 is a psalm for living in a world with risks and perils. Its words do not eliminate our fears, enemies, and real-life struggles, it doesn't give us a magical protective shield from the virus; instead, it proclaims using the imagery of a sheep talking about his shepherd that God is faithful to each of us as we navigate life's valleys and God is faithful to Christ's church.

God is faithful. That's the resounding good news throughout Scripture. God created the world and it was good. Sin entered the world and the good order was broken, we turned in on ourselves and became disoriented from God and one another. And God out of great love and faithfulness came in Christ to live, die, and rise in order to repair and reconcile, to reorient the world to Himself. And so though we stand in the shared valley of pandemic, of the challenge of being church during this time and the way that is a shared experience across the Synod and a unique gift and challenge at each of our 153 congregations, and as you stand in your unique personal ditches that existed before the pandemic and those that formed during it, in all of these circumstances, we are able to look back and remember God's faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah, to Miriam, Aaron and Moses and the Israelites, to Ruth and Naomi, to Mary and Joseph, to our grandparents and parents, and God's gift of his very self in Christ Jesus.

And it is in looking back that we are able to look forward, to see through to the other side of the valley, and to trust in faith that God is reorienting us to his very self, that even now God is at work in surprising ways. I mean just consider the new things God has done in the life of the church during this time! Did your pastor know the first thing about recording a sermon and posting it online pre-COVID? Did your congregation know how to live stream or hold a congregational meeting on Zoom before the pandemic? Trust me, God is at work doing a new thing. Could you imagine how our churches would do outreach and serve neighbor when we weren't able to access our buildings? And somehow, each week I read stories of God acting in surprising ways, bold, faithful serving ways. Why? Because God has

chosen to be our shepherd, promised to be with us through the whole journey including the valleys, and even in the presence of real threats and dangers God is preparing tables to feed the hungry and care for the sick, God is heard in neighbors advocating for justice and peace, God is at work in the hands of quilters and seamstresses crafting masks, God is pursuing us even now with goodness and mercy. We have a Good Shepherd leading us through this time.

And He is none other Christ Jesus who calls his sheep by name, who laid down his life for us and the world, that in his dying we are freed, that in his rising we have the free gift of new life in Him. **And so, there is reason to rejoice and strength enough to take the steps required to walk through this valley and keep on living, in a new way. So neighbors and friends near and far, Virginia Synod,**

Recite verse from 2nd reading.

The peace of the Good Shepherd be with you always. Amen.