

Walking the Valley of the Shadow

By: Meagan McLaughlin

May 3, 2020. Pastor Meagan reflects on today's readings by noting that none of them promise that danger will be eliminated, death will cease to exist, or evil will be no more. Things change and we are not the same. But God does not change.

Readings: [Acts 2:42-47](#), [Psalm 23](#), [John 10:1-10](#)

*** Transcript ***

I was struck, as I read today's readings, that although all of them mention danger in one form or another, none of them promise that danger will be eliminated. That death will cease to exist. That evil will be no more. Acts 2 acknowledges that there are needs in the community. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," says Psalm 23. And our gospel today names thieves and bandits that attempt to steal and harm the sheep. Our texts do not present a promise that hardship and even evil will be absent, but something else. It reminded me of something that happened when I was young, my first experience of God's presence in the midst of things that we don't understand, sadness and confusion.

When I was about seven years old, my favorite pastor collapsed after church one Sunday. We went home unsure of what the outcome would be, and being one who likes to have answers, and wants to understand, I went to the source: my children's Bible. I read it from cover to cover that day, looking for the answer to why someone so good would die like that, if that's what was happening. I remember finishing, and still not having my answer — and yet realizing that somehow that was okay, because God knew the plan even if I didn't.

Now, lest you begin to think that I have spent all of the intervening years feeling serene and peaceful and hopeful, let me assure you — I have not. Doubts, questions, frustrations, grief, anger, are all a normal part of human existence and I, like all of you, have experienced them all along the way. But this experience was one of those touchstone moments in my life that has shaped me, revealed something of God to me, and has in many ways informed how I experience God and understand life and death. It has made possible a slow, gradual, sometimes painful, unclenching of the need to have answers for everything as I have grown older.

Christ Lutheran family, as the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 continues, we are walking together through a time that is full of unanswered questions. Why is this happening? Who is this going to impact? Where is God? What are we supposed to do in this really strange time? And maybe most importantly, how long is this going to last? So much we don't know and don't understand. We may sense the thieves and the bandits, feel the weight of the shadow in the valley at times, as we navigate hospital corridors, or grocery store aisles, or cross streets to give our neighbors space as we walk on these sunny days of spring, or stay in our Upper Rooms to keep ourselves and our fellow humans safe. None of our readings today promise us that the thieves and the bandits and shadows will go away, much as we wish they might.

For those of us used to feeling safe most of the time, and sure of ourselves and our future, these readings today can often be taken as a promise that we will be protected from the dangers and the sadness of this human life. In this time of COVID-19, when danger and sadness and anxiety and uncertainty seem to be all around us, these readings sound very different.

Psalm 23 is so often used at funerals, and there is a reason for that. Psalm 23 names head-on the reality of death, the presence of the valley of the shadow. It speaks of a table of abundance, in the midst of enemies who seek to destroy. A wise woman I know created a painting of that image, a table with enemies surrounding it, and she named the enemies — fear, anxiety, self-loathing, resentment. Anyone else felt those enemies, those internal enemies, hovering close in these days? What does your valley look like in this time? Take a moment to name that for yourself, and if you would like to, share that in the chat. Psalm 23 names the valley, and it claims the promise that God the shepherd is there with us. God is with us as we walk the valley, leading us toward places of stillness and healing and renewal. Even in the presence of enemies, the table God provides is ready, abundant, overflowing, and open to everyone. Where are your still places in this time? Where are you finding healing and renewal? Take a moment to name that for yourself, and share in the chat if you wish.

Jesus the shepherd, in our gospel, comes to us bringing life to the full. Thieves and bandits, whatever shape they may take in our nightmares, or our imaginations, or even our daily news feeds, may bring death, and lack, and a reason for fear, but our Risen God brings life, and guides us out to pastures that have all we need. And if we wonder what to do as we navigate the valley, feel the shadow, sense the presence of the thieves and the bandits, we can take courage from the story of the early church, as shared in Acts today. They experienced daily threat from Roman soldiers, and all of the stresses of living as an occupied people. They, like us, were separated from their primary place of worship, as the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. They, like us, were coming together to live out their faith in new ways, to make sense of what was happening, and to be church together. When — not if — people were in need, they shared what they had. They prayed and they broke bread together. And they gave thanks to God for what they had. We at Christ Lutheran are called to follow their example, even, and perhaps especially, in this time of transformation. Pray. Break bread together. Share what we have with those who are in need. And most of all, give thanks!

Fr. Slattery did die that day, and following his funeral life proceeded in many ways as normal from that day forward, as if things were the same. And yet, it was not quite the same. I was not the same. And we living through this time of COVID-19 will not be the same. But one thing will not change: God is with us, guiding us and leading us to green pastures and still waters, places of healing and renewal. We, the Christ Lutheran family, will continue to pray, and break bread, and share what we have with those who are in need. The voice of Jesus our shepherd calls us, and we know that voice, perhaps more clearly in times like this than usual. And in this moment, as we gather together via Zoom and phone and email, and in our homes, and as this crisis passes and we slowly return to our church building, wherever we are — we will dwell in God's house, forever. Thanks be to God!

*** Keywords ***

2020, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, John 10:1-10, coronavirus