



“Covid-19 and the 23rd Psalm”
Scripture – Psalm 23
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 3, 2020

Liz Goodman is a pastor in rural Massachusetts where she and her husband moved when they began their lives together. At the outset, they decided not to have cable TV. This was before streaming so, for entertainment, they relied on DVDs from the Blockbuster video store – remember those?

Over time they had two sons, and since Liz and her husband never got back into the television habit, their two boys have grown up in a world relatively free of advertising. There are few billboards where they live and no buses plastered with ads. So, even today, 15 years later, when they visit their grandparents or stay in a hotel, and turn on the television, the boys go bonkers. They are shocked at how annoying ads are and wonder why people put up with them.

Since the boys never had commercials whipping up their desire for things, they never developed a long list of wants. Liz remembers taking her older son to Target when he was eight. When they walked down the toy aisle, his eyes grew large. He had no idea that all of this stuff existed. After a minute or so of taking it all in, he turned to his mom and asked if they could leave. She said he was clearly uncomfortable with how all of this made him feel.

Ever since then, Goodman’s understanding of the opening line in the 23rd Psalm has been altered. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” I shall not *want*. Most of us have heard that line as comforting and reassuring. God is like our shepherd. Therefore, God will insure we not lack the basics of life. We will have food and water and shelter. We will not be deprived of the essentials.

However, as Goodman points out, that phrase could also mean we shall be “free of the condition of wanting, the frantic desire for stuff.”¹ In this way, the word *want* is more like crave. We want something simply because we have a craving for it.

When we think of “I shall not want” in this light, it is an echo of the 10th Commandment. You remember the 10th Commandment, right? Number 6 is “You shall not murder.” Seven is “You shall not commit adultery.” Eight is “You shall not steal.” Nine is “You shall not bear false witness.” Ten is “You shall not covet (or want or crave or desire) you neighbor’s house; or wife; or slave; or ox; or donkey; or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

One of the things I have heard from people during this pandemic is a reassessment of their wants. When a wicked virus is racking up a staggering death toll, it can very quickly rearrange your notions of what is essential and what is not.

In only three months Covid-19 has snatched the lives of more than 240,000 people worldwide. In the United States alone, there have been more than one million cases of this extremely contagious and deadly disease, and more than 65,000 have perished so far.

To lessen the risk of being infected by the Coronavirus, most of us have been sheltering in place for the past seven weeks. This jarring change in our routine and the anxiety of knowing that an invisible grim reaper is just a cough or touched door knob away, has prompted many of us to reflect on what is truly important. The basics of food, water, shelter, electricity, and income that we took for granted now loom large as items more precious than gold. This crisis has also prompted us to transfer items that were formerly on the “I need” side of our ledger, to the “Not essential” column.

We may grumble about being confined to our homes and restricted from venturing out for dinner at our favorite restaurant, but most of us are also deeply grateful that we are not required to work in an environment that makes us highly vulnerable. Moreover, gratitude for our blessings persuades us to think about those who do not have the luxury of such good fortune. As we ponder the depths of what it means to say, “I shall not want,” God’s Spirit stirs in us a desire to say, “I SHALL want” for people who suffer.

In addition to the physical toll this pandemic has extracted, it has also pulled back the covers and exposed numerous inequities. Many of the low wage workers who provide our food and stock our shelves have neither unemployment nor health insurance. To pay their bills, they must continue to work even when they are ill, and we have seen the deadly results as Covid-19 has swept through meat packing plants around the country. Unfortunately, it may take empty shelves of meat products for people to wake up to the intolerable conditions under which many labor.

The Good Shepherd, who walks with us through what is surely one of the darkest valleys of our lifetimes, wants to restore our souls. However, to accomplish it, the Shepherd must use the rod and staff not only to comfort us, but also to prod us to care for the weak and vulnerable. The words that Jesus uttered to condemn the scribes and Pharisees for focusing on minute matters of God’s law while neglecting the substantial segments, speak to us in this perilous moment in history: “Woe to you who neglect to act with justice and mercy.” (Matthew 23:23)

Nurturing loving relationships and extending ourselves to those who suffer is what restores our soul. The desire for possessions, pleasure, power, and prestige, comes from a shallow place within us. The desire for a meaningful life comes from the depths of our soul.

The Psalm states that the Good Shepherd “leads us beside still waters.” Have you reflected on that image? Still waters – as opposed to turbulent waters – evoke in our soul a disposition of serenity and satisfaction. The Good Shepherd leads us to such still waters when we support people through a crisis, when we feed people who are hungry, when we comfort people who mourn, when we protect people who are vulnerable, when we demand a fair system not simply for ourselves, but for all. This pandemic has revealed some of the changes that need to be made in our nation – some of the wrongs that need to be made right. With every crisis comes opportunity and one of the opportunities of this crisis is an increased awareness that we are more in harmony with the world when we care about each other and support each other.

Today there is a beautiful spirit among so many of our citizens who recognize and applaud the countless heroes of this crisis – every person who works in a health care facility from administrators to doctors to nurses to technicians to maintenance workers to janitors. We salute the first responders and those who work in groceries and those who produce and process and deliver our food. We stand in awe of those who work in nursing homes.

A loved one of one of our members died of Covid-19 just a few days ago. And since the family could not be present with him when he died, his 25 year old nurse sat and held his hand as he slipped from this world to the next.

This crisis has brought out the best in so many people. It has reminded us of the precious nature of life and the vital importance of taking care of each other. Surely this is what the psalmist means when he says: God “leads me in the right paths for his name’s sake.”

Simply surviving this pandemic is not enough. The Lord is our Shepherd who leads us to a life that is valuable and noble, and characterized by joy and generosity. Mere existence will not cut it. People of faith walk the path that leads to hope and new life. May we seize upon the new possibilities that will unfold from this crisis to create a world that is better for everyone.

NOTES

1. Liz Goodman, “On not wanting,” *christiancentury.org*, March 22, 2020, Fourth Sunday in Lent.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, our faithful Shepherd, you not only provide the things that sustain our existence, but you lead us on the path to what makes life good and true and joyful. This deadly virus that stalks our planet has driven home the certainty that we do not want for the essentials of life. Now, we pray, that you help us to transform our want for material possessions into a craving for the fruit of your Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Gracious God, as we shelter in place and practice social distancing, we recognize our deep gratitude for countless people who are working hard to help us during this deadly pandemic.

We give thanks for health care workers and first responders who risk their personal safety each day as they care for the unfortunate souls who have contracted Covid-19. We give thanks for those who work in our groceries and pharmacies, for those who deliver our food and those who deliver our mail, and for those who pick up our trash and collect our recycling.

We give thanks for elected officials who make wise decisions that are truly life and death in nature, and for scientists and public health officials who are helping us navigate these troubled waters.

God of compassion, we give thanks for nurses and aides who stand in for families who cannot be with their loved ones at the end – who hold the hands of one patient after another as they breathe their last. May these angels of mercy have the strength to continue their quiet, beautiful ministry and may they be buoyed by their trust in your everlasting care.

God of love, help each of us to be an agent of healing by revealing to us the ways that we may use our gifts to promote health and wholeness and peace. Now hear us as we join our voices together in prayer, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.