

**March 15, 2020**  
**Keep Calm and Wash Your Hands**  
**Psalm 23**  
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**Invocation:**

Loving Shepherd, you know our names; you care for us.  
When we face darkness and death, walk beside us.  
When we hunger for your love, fill us with your presence.  
When we are fearful, feed us at your table.  
May we dwell in the house of goodness and mercy  
all the days of our lives. Amen.~ written by Mary Petrina Boyd

**Scripture Reading - Psalm 23:**

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he refreshes my soul.  
He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever.

**MESSAGE – Keep Calm and Wash Your Hands**

As you may or may not know we are smack dab in the middle of a Lenten Sermon series on water. Today is the third Sunday of Lent and, originally, I had prepared a very different sermon to bring you this morning.

But in light of the rapidly evolving conditions surrounding the Corona Virus pandemic that led us to this very different worship experience – another message keeps begging to come to the forefront: Keep Calm and Wash Your Hands!

So yes, water still features prominently.....but so does fear. Fear caused by the reality of a pandemic.

Pandemic .... I don't know about you, but that word seems so archaic to me. Something out of the dark ages – like the bubonic plague. In this day and age of modern science and medical advancements it seems crazy to me that we could find ourselves in this global health crisis caused by a flu virus. Yet here we are, part of creation along with a gazillion microbes that have their own agenda and life-driving force.

Daily, we are learning about the nature of COVID-19, how it is spread and which populations are most at risk. The rise of infected people is staggering and that's just the people we know about. It's scary. As fear grows, social media is full of reports showing pictures of empty store shelves. People are panic-buying. I confess I got caught up in that hysteria last week while running errands. I stopped by CVS, (our neighborhood drug store) to pick up some shoe inserts and thought, "I might as well grab some Lysol disinfectant while I'm here"– nope. Not a canister or box of wipes left on the shelves. Same for hand sanitizer. "Well", I reasoned, "CVS doesn't have very deep stock on household goods". So, I headed to Target and then the grocery store. Same at both locations. Shelves really are empty! Not only hand sanitizer, disinfectant sprays, wipes and cleaning supplies but also toilet paper, and bottled water as well. With a growing sense of dread that perhaps I had waited too long I grabbed the last two cases of bottled water and a humungous package of bargain 1-ply toilet paper (because that was all that was left). I sort of wrapped my body around these items and made my way to checkout like a gold prospector protecting his lode. If anyone made eye contact I might have shouted, "Go on. Git!"

Maybe some of you can relate?

After I arrived at home and had carried everything into the kitchen I began filling in my family on the heroic measures I took to save their lives that day. My husband, Jeff just sort of stared at me with this genuinely perplexed look on his face. He asked, "But, why all the bottled water?" "Because of Corona Virus, we may have to quarantine", I responded. To this, Jeff very sweetly and gently placed one hand on my shoulder and with the other he turned toward the kitchen sink and turned on the water.

I am not trying to make light of a very real issue. We have to be aware and we have to prepare. But, stockpiling hand sanitizer, toilet paper and bottled water is nowhere on the

CDC's recommended list of how to prepare for a mandatory quarantine. But, do you know what is on the recommended list of how to prepare for a mandatory quarantine?

- Create a plan based on the needs and daily routines of your household members.
- Know your risk
- Monitor your health
- Make a plan for those who are at greater risk for serious complications
- Practice good hygiene.

### **Essentially, Keep Calm and Wash Your Hands!**

Even if you're not worried about your own personal health or your risk is low, Nadia Bolz Weber, posted this comment on social media which demonstrates another layer or ripple effect caused by the Corona Virus, "[this is] also now a pandemic of human disappointment- cancelled trips, art openings, sports events, book tours, concerts. Things folks have been planning for, working toward, and excited about – that's a lot of grieving on top of sickness".

Underneath all of this disappointment, there lies a very present vulnerability. Hysteria, fear and a sense of loss has led us into our own dark and foreboding valley. A valley where the threat of scarcity and death make us compete against each other for physical, emotional and spiritual resources. From this place of fear and confusion, Psalm 23 has a message of hope.

Psalm 23 was written for a vulnerable community absolutely distressed by alienation in exile. The preceding Psalm 22 describes this community. It begins with their agonizing lament, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and ends with them emerging from their darkness, weak and stumbling, and blinking into the light of having been delivered by God. Psalm 23 enthusiastically emphasizes a depth of assurance but make no mistake - it is not cheaply attained. Rather just the opposite; it is the hard-won assurance of those who have suffered greatly while relying on the gentle guidance of their shepherd to lead them.

Belief and faith in God does not inoculate any of us from periods of darkness and doubt, or from feeling overwhelmed and lost. Psalm 23 reminds us that God is with us through it all, our gentle shepherd in whom we can rely!

The shepherd imagery is important to this story and to ours. A sheep is a particularly vulnerable creature, especially when it is isolated from the herd. According to instincts

developed over centuries, sheep react to the situations they find themselves in – they either run when they perceive danger or band together for protection.

Like sheep, our instinct is to flock together. But, what happens when staying close makes you even more vulnerable? Recently, I was startled by the sound of someone screaming in my backyard. It wasn't just high-decibel complaining, it was like someone was being tortured. Impulsively, I ran outside thinking perhaps a coyote had cornered one of my cats. And then I realized the screaming was coming from a few houses down. When I got to the corner to investigate the situation, I saw several of my neighbors walking toward a young boy who was having an epic meltdown. His father was following close behind. The neighbors were concerned and confused and began to shout out, "Are you alright?" "Do you need help?". This only made the young boy more agitated and scream louder. You could see the panic on his father's face. About that time another neighbor came out and told everyone that the boy was visiting from out of state, that he was autistic and walking to discharge energy while his father assured his safety from a distance. With that explanation we understood that the best thing we could do to support this family was walk away with compassion and trust that the young boy was safe and protected. And I could almost hear the father saying thank you, thank you, thank you with the relief and gratitude I saw in his eyes.

Can we fight our instinct to band together for the greater good of the most vulnerable among us? I hope so. Because that is what this Corona Virus Pandemic calls for. In order for us to care and protect each other we are no longer able to safely gather together in our sanctuary. While we don't know how long this will be necessary we do know this - Church exists beyond these walls! Even in our physical separation we are yoked in spirit and guided by love.

To that point, I want to share a prayer I came across this week through my Spiritual Direction training:

PANDEMIC

--Lynn Ungar 3/11/20

*What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—  
the most sacred of times?  
Cease from travel.  
Cease from buying and selling.  
Give up, just for now,  
on trying to make the world  
different than it is.*

*Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.  
Center down.*

*And when your body has become still,  
reach out with your heart.  
Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.  
(You could hardly deny it now.)  
Know that our lives  
are in one another's hands.  
(Surely, that has come clear.)  
Do not reach out your hands.  
Reach out your heart.  
Reach out your words.  
Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.*

*Promise this world your love--  
for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
so long as we all shall live.*

When we walk through the dark valleys of our lives, sometimes self-preserving instincts kick in that lead us to frenzied levels of excess, be it emotional, physical, or spiritual. In those times there is a gentle shepherd calling us to follow a somewhat more difficult path, but a path that leads to restoration by the still waters of green pastures. With a rod to protect, a staff to guide, a table where all are safe, all are fed and no thirst is left unquenched. A table where we are the guest, and anointed in God's restorative love.

So, rest assured my friends. Keep calm and wash your hands and know that God's goodness and love will follow you all the days of your life, even the most trying ones.

Amen.