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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
4th Sunday in Lent, Year A Psalm 23

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Our theme for the season of Lent this year is about telling our stories of faith. Maybe what we tell isn't so much a story, but the truths we hold onto as people of faith. Lutherans aren't known for having good "faith language," at least not in our own words.

But as I witnessed the video interviews our confirmation youth did with some of our church members, I found that we do have it, we just need to be given opportunities to talk about faith—saying who God is and how we are in relationship with God.

Some of the ways we learn the language of faith is through worship. With the words of the Holy Scriptures, our hymns and songs, and in the words of our liturgy like the Creeds, the Words of Institution during Holy Communion, and our prayers this faith language seeps into our hearts and we can draw from it anytime.

This morning I'm preaching on Psalm 23, one of the most well-known passages in the Bible, even to those who are not church-goers. It is often the first Scripture requested for funerals. But today, I'd like you to hear these familiar words in the setting of the life we are living right now.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters."

Years ago, I invited the High School youth in my previous church to rewrite Psalm 23 in their own words. None of them raised sheep, so the image of the Lord as their shepherd didn't connect very well.

The one revision I remember began, "The Lord is like my car..." For that teenager, his car was a place of security. In his car he could come and go safely, to just about anywhere he wanted to go. If he had his car, he had all that he needed.

Maybe you can think of a different image than shepherd. What image, when given to God, reminds you of God's care and keeping for you?

The Psalm then changes from talking about God to speaking to God. "You restore my soul, O Lord, and guide me along right pathways for your name's sake."

How has your prayer life been these days? We have been walking a path this week that is not clearly marked. As a leader in the church, I can empathize with our civil leaders who are making very difficult decisions without having experienced anything like this pandemic before, at least not in our lifetimes.

But God has guided us in the past. We have all experienced times of an unknown or unpredictable future. How long will this illness last? Which treatment should I take? After a graduation or a job loss, what is the next step, and how will I know which choice to make?

The psalmist helps us remember that God has journeyed with us before, and continues to do that even today. "You restore my soul [today], O Lord, and guide me [today] along right

pathways...” And as the Lord guides us, we are reminded to notice God’s presence and to acknowledge it to others “...for [God’s] name’s sake.” Our testimony of God’s faithfulness, when told to others, glorifies and praises God.

The next two verses might hit closer to home than we’ve noticed before. Do you feel like you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death? Does this virus seem like an enemy that is in our presence, even if we can’t see it?

The psalmist reminds us that the right pathways God leads us along may take us through valleys and darkness. The green pastures and still waters may be the same places others have been brought to, even the people or the diseases that we see as enemies.

God does not always steer us away from the things that bring fear and worry, but God promises to be with us. “I shall fear no evil; for you are with me.” The rod and staff of the Lord are the truths and the commandments God has given us to follow that protect us in times of trouble.

And even in the midst of enemies of any kind, we remember that we have been anointed, chosen and claimed by God as God’s precious children. God’s love and blessing overflows for us every day.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” This final verse carries us into God’s promised future. God created each of us and declares us to be “good”. That goodness is still there, even if it is sometimes hidden.

That goodness is in us and in those we struggle to love. God’s mercy pursues us, granting us grace when we forget to trust in God’s promise to shepherd us.

Psalm 23 is a statement of faith. It declares who God is and how we are in relationship with God. How might you state your faith in God? Which metaphors or images express how you have experienced God in your life?

On our *Taking Faith Home* page for this week the first Caring Conversation question asks us to tell about a time someone did something that really changed your understanding of that person. We could also think about times when our understanding of God was changed.

These are our stories of faith. These are the truths we must learn to tell. We tell them to glorify and praise God for who God is and how God lives with us, no matter what the day or season of life brings.

Thanks be to God! Amen