

*During Pandemic, Still My Good Shepherd*  
Psalm 23:1-6

As we look at the closings of schools, cancellations of sporting events, celebrations being rescheduled and even churches meeting only online, we have to look at “what is at the heart of these unprecedented days and the measures that have been taken?”

What is it that we are afraid might happen? What is it that has so many people worrying? Are the leaders of this world humbled by the reality, that no army in the world can stop it?

Are we ourselves humbled by the reality that we are nowhere near as independent and confident of the control we have over our lives than we did just a couple weeks ago?

Our plans, schedules, and commitments have all changed with no input from us. For all the expectations of what we were going to do and how we were going to do it, has now been changed.

Pastor Rick Mobley writes: One of the things I remember growing up as a kid, was how often certain older members would end their conversation with the words, “Lord willing” or “if the Lord wills.” (I remember that too). It was only later that I understood they were quoting a well-known writer by the name of James.

James 4:13-15 – *“Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you don’t even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”*

A couple weeks ago, there were things we thought that nothing was going to stop us from doing, that all of a sudden we won’t be doing. Those older folks knew what they were saying when they said, “If it be the Lord’s will.”

As we are faced with a situation that has bloomed into a crisis, every one of us is confronted with the issue of “Who is our leader at this time?” What do we want our leaders to protect us from? What are we willing to do or become if this thing continues?

I imagine we must appear to God like sheep scattered on a hill trying figure out which direction to run. Due to the spread of information (and misinformation) on social media; some sheep are terrified.

When you peel back the layers of our anxiety, what is at the heart of it all? What are we really worrying about? Fear of sickness or death, or fear for those we love, are genuine concerns.

Yet, as believers, we have the antidote to the fear of death. His name is Jesus Christ. He said, “I am the resurrection and the life ... Whoever lives and believes in me will never die!”

Can we really trust what Jesus tells us about death? I think we ought to consider his words in that we know that he died, and we know that he rose! Jesus died on a cross, and he rose from the dead, because he knew each one of us was going to die because of sin. He knew that we would

be afraid of death, because inside, we know that we have done wrong, and that somehow we are going to give an account for what we have done.

It was out of his love for us, that he gave us the words to remove the fear of death. He says in John 14:1 – *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. **Trust** in God; trust also in me."*

Today, more and more people are being troubled because they are forced to face with, "I could get this coronavirus and not even know it." They can take all kinds of precautions but still be plagued by fear.

How should believers respond to any crisis that feeds on fear? It begins with knowing, our **hope** is always to be rooted in God. Perhaps the most well-known verse in the bible is where we begin. Psalm 23:1 – *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."*

God says we are his sheep, the sheep of his pasture. God knew about the coronavirus before time began. God knew about our days, before a single one of them came into being. Nothing has ever caught God by surprise.

This is not the first virus or plague to enter the world. *Have you ever considered the possibility that God wants to use His Church to show the world who He is, by how we respond in times such as these? Are we willing to talk with others about what the fear is? Are we willing to bring up the topic of death and what comes afterwards?*

When our friends and co-workers mention how worried they are about what's going to happen next, do we join in with how worried we are too? Or will we remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 6 – *"I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink ... Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"*

As believers, are we to be afraid, or to worry about what the coronavirus might do to us? How it will affect our plans, our job, our investments, even our families ... Do we believe that *in all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to His purpose?* We never know where our faith is rooted, until we run into a crisis.

Past plagues and diseases have been opportunities for Christians to shine in society. Between the years 250 AD and 270 AD a terrible plague devastated the Roman Empire, stretching across Europe, the Middle East and northern Africa.

This occurred at the same time there was an empire-wide persecution of Christians under Emperor Decius. The enemies of the Christians blamed the Christians for the plague. But there were 2 problems with the theory of the Christians being responsible.

The first is that many Christians died from the plague. Why would Christians start something to kill Christians? But the second problem with the theory was the Christians' witness of the love of Jesus to their unbelieving neighbors. Whereas many people abandoned those who got sick, the Christians risked their lives to take care of those who had been discarded, even by their families.

Candida Moss, professor of Early Christianity at Notre Dame, notes, “An epidemic that seemed like the end of the world actually promoted the spread of Christianity. By their action in the face of death, Christians showed their neighbors that Christianity is worth dying for.”

One more ... Jim Denison: [The bubonic plague struck Germany in 1527](#). The Reformer Martin Luther and his wife Katharina, who was pregnant at the time, were urged to flee the city. However, they chose to stay in order to minister to the sick and dying.

When asked for advice, Luther wrote a pamphlet that is as remarkable today as when he produced it. Luther counseled his readers to utilize medicine and intelligence. He also practiced what we call social distancing: “I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence.”

With this caveat: “If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely.” He understood the urgency of sharing the gospel so as to lead the sick to saving faith before they died and to minister to believers in their final days.

Martin and Katharina could risk their lives to serve others because they were not afraid of death. Their hope was in proper procedures and medical care, but even more, it was in Christ. They trusted their Lord to protect them in life and to bring them to heaven in death, whenever it came.

My point is *not* that we should refuse the urgent calls to social distancing that are absolutely crucial to slowing the spread of the pandemic. To the contrary, as medical officials are urging us, we must practice such critical measures. My point is that *choosing to hope in God sustains us like nothing else can*.

Do we believe Jesus when he tells us that he is the Good Shepherd? We like to believe that means that Jesus is going to surround us with good things that will make us comfortable in life. He’s going to lead us to lie down in green pastures where there is plenty around us and we can rest happy.

He will take us to where the water is calm, so that we can drink deep. Yes, we enjoy the still and quiet waters. Yes, the Shepherd supplies a joy this world doesn’t understand. Yes, he refreshes us through his Word & restores us through his Spirit. Again & again.

But then we choose to forget ... that’s not the only place Jesus leads us, and that’s not the only role Jesus has for us. What is this talk about walking through the valley of the shadow of death ... walking through the darkest valley?

Do we still look to Jesus then, or is there something else we want to grab on to? This valley does not catch Jesus by surprise because the verses before it state that he was leading us along the right path when we arrived at this valley.

There are all kinds of valleys the shepherd leads us down. The valley of sickness, the valley of loneliness, the valley of pain and suffering, the valley of broken dreams or unfulfilled promises, the valley of unemployment, the valley of financial loss, and the valley of the death of someone we love. Those are valleys we have no control over and yet the events of life seem to slide us into them whether we are willing to go or not.

But then there are those valleys that are created specifically for us to do the will of Christ. Our Good Shepherd also said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.”

Let’s just suppose for a moment that this coronavirus is being used by God to create a harvest of hearts that are searching because of fear, anxiety and worry. Beyond the virus itself, people are going to worry about how they are going to pay their bills if they can’t work, and who will watch over their kids if they are expected to work.

What was it the Christians had during the plagues in Europe that caused them to respond to the need, when everyone else was running away? Could it be that they loved Jesus above all things? Could it be they believed the promises of Jesus even in the face fear. Were they simply trying to love their neighbor as themselves?

Did they understand that their witness in the midst of such crisis might be the single thing that showcased the love of Christ in such a powerful way that the one in desperate need could exchange their fear for faith, their despair for hope, their looming death for life eternal?

Whatever it was, I want it for my own life. I want it for the people of Riverlawn. I want it for today’s Body of Christ. We have a living hope promised to us that goes far beyond the concerns and crises of this world.

The psalmist does not despair in the valley of the shadow of death. He goes on to declare, “*I will fear no evil, for you are with me!*” {P}

Yes, it is important to wash your hands frequently, to use hand sanitizer, to follow informed health protocols ... but that’s not where your deliverance is. Your deliverance is in the fact that God is with you, God is in you, and God is for you!

How does God expect to use us in response to the worry and fear that has spread through our nation and world? Will we see this as an opportunity to reach out and serve those who are affected by this situation *creatively, prudently, lovingly*? Will we show a confidence in Christ for our future that the world has not seen in our day? Will we become bolder in our witness of the God who is in charge of our lives?

Even if we think the coronavirus is a great enemy, the psalmist concludes, “*You prepare a table before me in the **presence** of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. **Surely** goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*” That is the promise of our Sovereign God. That is the enduring presence of our Shepherd. That is the certain hope we have in him.

Quotes collected from:

Rev. Dr. Rick Gillespie-Mobley, “The Shepherd and The Coronavirus”

Rev. Dr. Jim Denison, “How to Make God Our ‘Mighty Fortress’ Today”

Martin Luther, “[Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague](#)”

Eric Metaxes, “Running Toward The Plague: Christians And Ebola”