

Moderator Richard Bott

Sermon for Online Worship, March 22, 2020

(Transcription of a sermon originally recorded online on Tuesday, March 17, 2020.)

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Our scripture reading today is the psalm for the Fourth Sunday in Lent which is Psalm 23. I'd like to offer you a paraphrase:

*ADONAI is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
God makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me beside still waters...  
restores my soul!  
God leads me on right paths, for the sake of the Holy Name!  
Yes, even though I walk through the deepest of valley,  
I will fear no evil – for 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 – goodness and mercy will follow me, all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of ADONAI, forever.*

It's really good to see your faces on this screen and to know that many of you are in your homes or in your churches.

It's really good to know that we are continuing to be church across the land.

I spend a lot of time on social media. It's kind of my space to play, it's also one of my bad habits. But one of the things that I've had the chance to do as I've wandered on social media is to see both people's fear, but also people's response to that fear, people's generosity, people's hope.

One of the things that I've seen popping up are Facebook groups that are set up from community to community where people are posting “in need of” or “I have,” or “on offer.” I see people letting other folks in their buildings know, “If you can't

get out for groceries, if it's not safe for you, then I'll get them and leave them outside of your door and you pick them up." It's people realizing that social isolation or physical isolation means that we actually need to be more socially connected.

This is not an easy time. It's not an easy time for the world. We look at Wuhan, we look at Italy. We also need to look at the places that we can't easily see, the ones that aren't getting in news, such as the Philippines. This morning I was reminded that in Bethlehem there are the first cases of COVID-19, and that the medical system is not easily able to respond.

Here in Canada, over the past few days things have been changing from hour to hour. We have schools closing, post-secondary institutions closing, in some places some businesses are being told that they need to close. And each day we're trying to flatten the curve, to slow down how COVID-19 spreads.

As people understand what that means, not just for them but for our elders and for other folks who could be at risk because of underlying realities, people are beginning to act to change their lives, to do things differently. And that's scary because we aren't quite sure how long this is going to take. We're working on trusting one another in new ways, working on finding new ways to be together.

But you know, one of the things that I have been reminded of in this is, that while this is new from many of us, this has been a reality that has hit the world at different times. Pandemic, where some form of infection be it viral or bacterial, has hit the world and hit people in ways that our bodies haven't been able to respond easily to and there have been deaths. It's taken time for our medical understanding to grow.

We tried to learn from some of those, even tried to learn as The United Church of Canada from what happened during the SARS outbreak in the early 2000s. We were able to put together an emergency plan that churches now have as a way of helping them figure out what they need to be doing. But it's a beginning for us and it's chaotic.

I was glad that Psalm 23 showed up in the lectionary for Sunday because it's often a scripture that we go to when we're in need of reminding that in the difficult times we aren't by ourselves. It's a scripture that often gets read that funeral

services or memorials or celebrations of life. And it's a scripture that I love because I really like some of the imagery in it. You know there are things about this idea of God shepherding me. Shepherding us, keeping us from going off the cliff. You know that rod in one hand and that staff in the other. The staff was there to keep us going in one direction, and the rod was there as a way for the shepherd to attack or to defend if things came to attack the sheep.

So this idea that God is present, not just kind of sitting and being, but intimately connected with all creation. Loving and protecting all creation becomes a really important piece of scripture for me to listen to. It reminds me that there have been individual times in our lives where we aren't sure what's going to happen next, there have been corporate times in our lives and in our history where none of us have been sure what's going to happen next. And yet as Julian of Norwich put it, "All shall be well; and all shall be well; and all manner of things shall be well."

It's my hope that as we think about the goodness and mercy that's going to follow us, we actually be people who carry that goodness and mercy with us. That we listen to what Jesus had to say about loving God with all that we are, loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. Because now is a moment where we as disciples of Jesus, as the church, we're called to love in really tangible ways, even in ways where we are possibly frightened about what's going to happen over the next little while.

So I'd like to ask you how can we help each other to reach out with our hearts when we aren't supposed to touch people. How can we work together with our congregations, communities of faith, with our mission partners, with other churches, with other communities of faith, interfaith partners, with the wider community, to make sure that people who are in need are also responded to during this time?

I don't know about you, but one of the things that happens to me when I'm in my space is that I can really turn inward on myself. Sometimes when I'm in my space, it's kind of easy to forget that there's a world out there a world that needs us. With the social isolation we need to be doing, how is God calling us to connect? How is God using us as a rod and a staff for the world? How is God helping all

creation to come to that place of green pasture? To come to that place of still water? To come to that place where our souls are restored?

Surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life, and we shall dwell in God's house forever. Amen and Amen

—*The Right Rev. Richard Bott is Moderator of The United Church of Canada*