

Welcome, Announcements, and Land Acknowledgement

*As we come to worship in Jesus' name we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather. We commit ourselves to just and respectful relationships within our congregation and our neighborhood.*

➤ *Don't be afraid (repeat)*

Call to Worship

When you find yourself lost and confused

– **may you hear Christ calling your name**

As you venture on uncertain pathways

– **may you recognize Christ with you on the journey**

In times of wondering and doubt

– **may you feel Christ's patient reassurance**

As we gather in worship – in all times and places – may we praise God.

**Christ is risen! Alleluia!**

† Gathering Prayer and Words of Hope

God of the ages and God of today – you are compassion, our cup overflows – you are hope, you lead us into green pastures – you are truth, you lead us beside quiet streams of reflection – you are life, you restore our souls – you are happiness, our cup overflows.

At morning, noon and night, you are perfect grace and our source of joy, and we are moved to worship you authentically and truly.

Merciful God, we confess that we are lost and have strayed from you and your ways like lost sheep. Too often have we followed the desires of our own hearts, minds, and bodies but ignored your desires and the needs of others. We have seen ourselves pure when we are not and great when we are small. We have failed in love, forgotten to be just, and ignored your truth.

Find us and forgive our foolishness and pride – return us to your paths of truth and love. We pray in Jesus' name. **Amen**

Children of God, the gospel does not offer anxiety and shame – but grace, peace, and joy. Accept the gifts of God and live with freedom and resilience as forgiven people.

➤ *Take, O take me as I am (repeat)*

† Prayer for Understanding

**God of wisdom, as we listen to your Word recorded by generations of your people, fill us with understanding by the power of your Holy Spirit. Reveal the mysteries of faith to us, so that we may grow in faithfulness, following Jesus, your Living Word. Amen**

Scripture    **Acts 9: 36-43**    **[NT 128]**

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.

Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay."

So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.

This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

**Psalm 23**    **responsive / displayed**

*Refrain 2*    ***My shepherd is the Lord. My shepherd is the Lord.***    (sing 3 times)

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures; leads me beside still waters;  
restores my soul, and leads me in right paths for the sake of The Lord's name.

*Refrain 2*    ***My shepherd is the Lord. My shepherd is the Lord.***

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.

*Refrain 2*    ***My shepherd is the Lord. My shepherd is the Lord.***

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 shall follow me all my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for the length of my days.

*Refrain 2*    ***My shepherd is the Lord. My shepherd is the Lord.***

**Revelation 7: 9-17** [NT 249]

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, *"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, *"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."*

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, *"Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"*

I said to him, *"Sir, you are the one that knows."*

Then he said to me, *"These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message

Tomorrow during the service celebrating Mary Carroll's life we will sing the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. It is so very often requested for memorial services. It is likely one of the few passages of scripture that many people – even those not connected with the church – are familiar with – may even know pretty much by heart.

Can you even remember a time when you were not familiar with this ancient Hebrew poem? It is I am certain the most famous of the 150 psalms. In terms of recognizability, Psalm 23 is probably right up there with popular ditties like "Roses are red, violets are blue," with Shakespearean sonnets like "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," and well-known song lyrics like "Happy birthday to you." If you hear even just a snippet of such well-known poems and songs, your mind fills in the rest automatically.

And that seems quite amazing to me given that the pastoral imagery of this poem is pretty remote from our everyday life. We can understand why the song "Happy Birthday" is so well-known: we all have many occasions every year to sing it for someone. Similarly love songs and sonnets are things we can relate to because most of us know what it's like to be in love – plus, Valentine's Day, wedding anniversaries, and marriage ceremonies give us any number of chances to reach for famous romantic poems and songs.

But Psalm 23 is mostly all about a shepherd and sheep, and I bet very few of us have ever even met a shepherd. We don't have regular contact with sheep – though we may see them in a field from time to time or wear a wool sweater on occasion. Speaking for myself, my primary contact with lambs comes at the dinner table! In terms of imagery, Psalm 23 doesn't seem to have any natural connection to us in the modern world. Most of us are far more familiar with lawyers, doctors, plumbers, and mechanics than we are with shepherds. We've had more experience with police directing traffic than we have had with sheep being directed along by a shepherd.

Yet the popularity of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm persists, and we must wonder why? The words should likely fall on our ears like a foreign phrase – outdated and out of context. Yet it doesn't. Why? Perhaps it is because in the deep places of our souls, we all sense that maybe everybody needs a shepherd. Way down deep maybe we long for something bigger, wiser, and stronger to take care of us – in AA groups they refer to a “higher power” – we may invoke divine guidance – our Creator – a shepherd.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

And, yet, so often it seems we do – I do – want. We want a moment of silence set against still waters. We want to stumble along the paths of righteousness. We want to turn our hearts and minds to God in the open, green meadow and breathe deeply the abundance of divine grace.

This Psalm articulates our intense, longing prayer of hope for a profound, inner wellspring of God-given peace that overflows even when we stride into the darkest corners of the earth – even as we find ourselves in dark valleys with shadows that speak of death – emotionally and physically and spiritually drained.

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...*

Have you ever been there – to the valley of the shadow of death? Sometimes it is referred to as Death Valley – a gloomy gorge – death's dark vale – a valley as dark as death – a place of deep and total darkness. Have you been there?

I know – it's not really “a location” – more like an idea or a state of mind – of being. It is a place of despair and fatigue and torment and terror. The valley of the shadow of death is not a real “place” but it is – without a doubt – real. You have been there – I have been there – just about everyone has some experience that they would define in this way.

I met someone once who lived in one of the darkest corners of the earth for more than a decade. What she described is nothing short of a living hell – torture, torment, bullying, beatings, attempted murder. She suffered abuses to body, mind and spirit that are beyond imagining. Her “death valley” was domestic violence – not a real “place” – yet all too real. When she shared her story I thought, “This woman knows what it is to live in the valley of the shadow of death.” Every day it loomed – casting a pall over all aspects of her life – snuffing out all light, all peace – at times even extinguishing hope.

I know of others who struggle with a different sort of valley – a valley of despair and physical pain. Those who are sick and suffering – frustrated and exhausted with the medical system – not because there is an expectation of perfection but because everything that can go wrong, seems to be going wrong. It is hard to remain hopeful. It is hard not to feel persecuted and unfairly treated. Why is God allowing this to happen?

We all may wonder this from time to time. What valley as dark as death do victims of senseless acts of violence experience? What place of deep and total darkness have you – or are you – experiencing? Where is God in that experience?

I don't believe that God "allows" such events to happen – God never promised you a rose garden after all – never promised that life would be fair – that surgery would always go well and everyone would be free from illness – that every spouse would treat the other with respect – that we are always going to be safe from evil in this world. God does not promise that there is no valley of the shadow of death. God's promise is that when it's your turn to confront the unfairness of life – no matter how hard it is – God will be at your side. God's promise is to offer strength and comfort and presence.

*I fear no evil...*

The psalmist is not saying, "I will fear no evil because evil only happens to people who deserve it. Only happens to someone else." The truth is – and we know this as well as the person who wrote the psalm does – the truth is that this is a scary, out-of-control world. There is evil in the world – and sickness – and devastation that comes to us in all kinds of ways. But the psalmist asserts that we can live in this dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world with confidence because God is with us – always.

I want to believe in a loving God. And when I see people suffering, when I watch the news and witness violence against the unsuspecting, when I learn of torture and terror happening in someone's home, I can only believe in a God of love and compassion because I know that some things happen in the world that God does not want to happen.

God is good. Nature is not innately good. Nature is blind – amoral. Fire burns and shrapnel wounds and disturbed people injure others and disease affects everybody, whether you deserve it or not.

We cannot deny the reality of evil, nor its capacity to wreak havoc. But the psalmist has adopted a resolute stance in the face of this real threat – *I fear no evil*. Not because the authorities are already on the scene. Not because perpetrators of violence and terror will be identified quickly and effectively. Not because vengeance can be exacted – culprits incarcerated or killed so that they can no longer hurt others. Not because medical advancements and pharmaceutical treatments are improving every day. No – the psalmist does not fear because you – God – are with me.

*You are with me – your rod and your staff – comfort me*

The rod and staff are tools of the shepherd – *the Lord is my shepherd* – so these are the tools of God. But remember, just as *the valley of the shadow of death* is not a particular place, the rod and staff are also figurative – metaphors for the hands and feet of God at work in the world.

When random gun wielders or terrorists strike the rod and staff of comfort come as people rushing forward despite the confusion and violence to get help to the injured and bring calm in the chaos – Mr. Rogers said “look for the helpers”. The rod and staff come in the guise of blood donors wanting to ensure that no one is at risk because of a shortage – as voices of hope and courage and reason. God’s comfort.

For those engaged in frustrating and potentially life-limiting medical treatment, the rod and staff of God’s comfort is evident in prayers of concern – in small acts of kindness bestowed – in the humor and optimism of family and friends. It is not always enough to brighten the deep darkness of distrust and despair, yet it persists – God remains, always at hand – ready when comfort can be accepted.

For the woman who suffered so cruelly at the hands of her violent, hate-filled husband, the figurative tools of the shepherd came as she tried to escape her torture. She had all but given up – longed for death in her dark valley. When she was offered a way out and she took it even though it meant leaving her children behind. She sat in an airport waiting to board – expecting her tormentor to appear at any moment, afraid to speak to anyone lest they report her to him. Another woman approached and sat beside her – asked if she was okay – didn’t leave even when ignored and snubbed. This other woman took the hand of the abused woman in her own and assured her that Jesus loved her and would comfort her. Those few words of blessed grace carried the woman forward to a place of renewed hope – led finally to her freedom and being reunited with her children in a place of safety.

I don’t know how that woman survived what she endured. I don’t know how she has been able to forgive and therefore be released not only from the prison of domestic violence but also from the prison of hate. How could anyone get through that? She maintained that she gained strength and comfort from God – that somehow the rod and staff of God came to comfort her in that airport through simple words compassionately offered. Her love and strength and faith were replenished: *your rod and your staff – they comfort me.*

Sometimes people who have been hurt by life get stuck in *the valley of the shadow of death* – they don’t seem to know how to find their way out – they can’t recognize the rod and staff that is offered to them. God does not leave them – does not leave us – even then. It is not because of God that we suffer. It is not God’s role to explain or justify the evil and unfairness of life – God is for comfort. God comes to those living in places of deep darkness – God takes them by the hand – God shows them how to find their way into the light again.

God is not only with us by the still waters of calm and serenity but, perhaps more importantly, remains present in the dark valley of shadow – fear not. **Amen**

➤ *My shepherd is the King of love*

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† Offering

In the Easter season, we celebrate God's most precious gift to us in Christ's dying and his rising. As we present our offering this morning, may our generosity reflect God's goodness to us, and the hope we have in Christ Jesus, even in troubled times.

➤ *Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

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**Generous God, thank you for all we have received from you in Christ and in creation. Bless the gifts we bring and use them in the service of your reign of justice and peace, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Guide. Amen**

† Pastoral Prayers and The Lord's Prayer

➤ *The Lord is my song*

446 – line B only

Lord Jesus Christ, you came to us bearing God's love, to walk with us as our Good Shepherd, showing us how to love each other. You pray with us and for us day by day. Today we turn to you with our hopes and concerns in these uncertain times. Draw near to us and to all those for whom we pray, so that your love will be known in our world this day.

➤ *The Lord is my song*

446 – line B only

Lord Jesus, on this Christian Family Sunday, we pray for the families we belong to. We thank you for parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, for the generations who started our families and all they gave to us. Today we thank you for all those who mothered us, grateful for their care and guidance. We pray for mothers throughout the world, thinking especially of mothers in Ukraine and other places of conflict, worried for their children and the future...

Strengthen every caregiver's hope and courage by the power of your Spirit and create peace in the world so children can grow up in safety.

➤ *The Lord is my song*

446 – line B only

Lord Jesus, we pray for families in our community and around the world in these uncertain times. We remember families in need – those struggling with economic upheaval and the high cost of living – those who know sorrow because someone has died or gone away – those who live in pain or fear, or face discrimination...

Surround these families with your love and courage – bring them support from their neighbours and guide each child and young person into the future.

➤ *The Lord is my song*

446 – line B only

Lord Jesus, we pray for the family of nations in this time of threat and conflict. Change the hearts of leaders bent on destruction or conquest. Give wisdom and courage to those who seek justice through negotiation, and protect all those who offer themselves in aid and advocacy work...

Bring peace with justice to this troubled world.

➤ *The Lord is my song*

446 – line B only

Lord Jesus, we pray for each other and for our church family. We give your thanks for the friendship and fellowship we share and the unique gifts each one brings to our life together. Rekindle our energy for ministry and mission and show us our path into the future...

Make us a beacon of hope in your name.

➤ *The Lord is my song*

446 – line B only

Lord Jesus, you are our Good Shepherd, guiding us through dark valleys and green pastures. We thank you for your presence with us in all times and situations as we offer together the prayer you gave us as one family of followers... ***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***

➤ *He leadeth me*

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### Blessing

As we go out into the world to love and serve our neighbour, may we remember that we are known by God. May we hear the voice of Jesus and follow him like beloved sheep following their shepherd. Let our words and deeds point to the One who gives eternal life. And may the help of the saving Christ, the wisdom of the Living God, and the support of the Holy Spirit embrace us all. Amen

➤ *Sing amen*

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