

PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST | REDDING CA

SEEK JUSTICE

LOVE KINDNESS

WALK HUMBLLY

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SUNDAY REFLECTIONS AND RITUALS | March 15, 2020

Wherever we are on life's journey...
I suppose this takes on a whole new dimension for us as we encounter one another digitally and from afar: physically separate, but united in intention, love, and mutual support.

We are all sojourners and pilgrims in life!
Whoever you are,
wherever you are on life's journey,
you are welcome at Pilgrim Church.

This Sunday Worship Document is produced by Pilgrim for all its friends and members honoring the requests of local health experts and officials to open up physical distance as a service to our community. I pray the time you take to reflect with us this morning would connect us all to the love of our Creator and deepen the love between us. We have included a reading and short reflection, followed by a suggested hymn for those wishing to sing a familiar song and two rituals we can do at home. The best way to stay connected with Pilgrim online is to visit facebook.com/ReddingPilgrimUCC, where we'll post video updates, and to watch for church emails from office@pilgrimchurchredding.org. Email us if you'd like to be included on our mailing list.

And now, let's worship!

Reading Psalm 23 | NRSV

to be read aloud in the home, using gender inclusive language as desired

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I 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 goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Reflection Pastor Allen

Whenever I face times of loneliness, loss, and challenge, as so many of us are beginning to process and witness around the globe, I often turn to prayer. My mind goes to the places and people, the texts and songs which have grounded my inner life in the past, searching for a kind of stability and peace to accompany my heart along its rollercoaster of experience. Few texts have shown up for me in this way more often or more deeply than Psalm 23. I'm sure some of you might agree.



3rd Century fresco of the Good Shepherd in the catacomb of Callixtus.

As I write I can hear an 80-year-old friend of mine reading “the 23rd” out-loud at his spouse’s bedside, telling me of the myriad challenges their faith had pulled them through. They always felt God was with them. I pause and I can hear the Psalm echoing through the corridors of my childhood, accompanying my small heart and big feelings through fears of shadows at night and not living up to expectations. Like the ancient author and like my friend, God was with me too.

My favorite line in the song appears at the end: “*surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,*” though (as some of you know) the meaning of the word “follow” is better rendered into English as “pursued.” This sentence signals a poetic shift from concern over the pursuing adversary (enemies, dark valleys) to a pursuant love. Goodness and mercy chasing after us around each bend in the path.

To dive into the text further -- the words for “shepherd” and “evil” are connected audibly by the sounds they make in Hebrew. The author pits one against the other. Difficulty/trial/evil is neither ignored nor denied in this Psalm: the reader walks *through* the valley. And yet, they are accompanied and met by the presence of an abiding goodness.

This abiding goodness in the divine presence resonated with folks down through history. Early Christians chose the imagery of the Good Shepherd when penning the manuscripts of the gospel of John and when they painted ancient frescos over the tombs of their loved ones. Jesus for them was not only the “Way,” the process of love and reconciliation, he was an embodiment of the Good Shepherd. “My sheep hear my voice,” he is quoted as saying—no small comfort to those who sometimes felt lost, afraid, and of small significance.

Perhaps we need Psalm 23 and the Shepherd of the gospels this week to remind us nothing could be further from the truth. We are known, held, and of wild significance. *In fact, the full significance of our lives probably exists beyond the scope of our understanding.* For most of us, this idea takes a little time and a little pursuing. We have to be literally *chased* by goodness and mercy to get the picture.

And so we rest in our beingness. We find rest in the peace which goes beyond understanding.

May this heavy moment of pause and stepping back refresh our communal understanding of our own belovedness and move our compassion to the front. May the spirit of God dwell richly in these intentional-faithful distances we create. And as we sing to one another each week, a blessing we affirm by candlelight this morning, may *God be with us till we meet again*.

Responsive Hymn | What a Covenant (Leaning on the Everlasting Arms)

<https://hymnary.org/hymn/NCH1995/471>

Ritual #1 | Hand Washing | modified from a version by Brian D. McLaren
to be prayed in front of the sink or place of sanitizing in the home, if desired

God of healing and well-being,
As I wash my hands I ask you
To cleanse me of other invisible viruses
Of the soul:
Hate, pride, greed, hostility,
Supremacy, superiority, selfish interest,
And all constriction of the heart.
As I join billions of others in this practice,
Help me feel how deeply we are all connected
And equally, infinitely loved by you.
Amen.

OR

A Prayer for handwashing in the time of COVID-19

By Dr. Sharon Fennema

this water is sacred
these hands are sacred
all that these hands will touch is sacred

this cleansing is sacred because the well-being of all creatures is sacred
this moment of washing away all that does not serve is sacred
this way of tending to the most vulnerable I encounter is sacred
this act of care for myself and others is sacred
because touch is sacred
and all that these hands will touch is sacred
These hands are sacred
This waster is sacred

Ritual #2 Candle Lighting

Select one candle for a person in our church (more if you would like to pray for yourself and for additional people). Say the person's name out loud as you light the candle and set it down. Raise your hand or hands, palms facing the light, and pray the oldest priestly prayer in the Book:

The Creator bless you and keep you,

The Creator shine their face upon you and give you peace. Amen.