

Looking to God during a Time of National Emergency
Psalm 23:1-6

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March 15, 2020

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies Ps. 23:5

In the worst of times we turn to the best of books. Within that best of books, we turn to one of the most beloved chapters. The best book is the Bible. The beloved chapter is the 23rd Psalm. God has often used these cherished verses to bring comfort and hope to people thrust into sickness, sorrow, and difficulty. The 23rd Psalm can minister to us now in our season of national emergency.

Let's linger especially over the 5th verse, which reads in part, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies"

We live now in the presence of a frightening enemy.

The enemy before us is the Coronavirus. It is frightening in several ways.

This enemy is frightening medically. It is invisible, seemingly unstoppable, highly contagious, and deadly, particularly to those who are already vulnerable because of age or disease.

This enemy is frightening economically. The stock market has tumbled. Businesses are closing for an indefinite period. Workers' incomes, particularly those who work for an hourly wage, are in jeopardy. The impact upon all this on stewardship here at the church has the church feeling anxious.

This enemy is frightening psychologically. Mark how it has turned us into a nation of hoarders, who are emptying store shelves of goods helpful in combating the virus and also of things that have nothing to do with the virus. It has made us desperate to have more than we need. It has made us suspicious of each other, fearing that those nearby may be carriers of the dreaded sickness. It has disrupted our lives, making it so we cannot go where we want, do what we want, live as we want.

Frightening as the enemy is, there is good news. And I turn to that now.

God has prepared us for just such a time as this.

The text from the 23rd Psalm speaks of the work of a shepherd. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" The idea here is that a shepherd goes to a tableland – a mesa, a plateau, a new pastureland – well in advance of the flock. There the shepherd scouts for poisonous plants that might be deadly to the sheep, signs of predators who might be threats to the sheep, and dangerous ground where a sheep might fall or become injured.

So! As the shepherd does for the sheep, so God does for us. The Lord God is not just with us here and now, God has already been to this place where we find ourselves now and has prepared it for us. God has prepared it by leaving much for our help and well-being.

God has left us worship. We needed to worship today in part because this is no time to stop turning to God; it is a time for turning to God. And we needed to worship today as well because worship is not so much something we attend; it is not something we do; it is not something we get something from. Worship is something that shapes us as God's people. There is a Nathaniel Hawthorne story about "The Old Man in the Mountain." It is about a mountain in the eastern portion of the United States that seems to have a face carved into it naturally. In Hawthorne's story there is a boy named Edward; he is from the village near the mountain. Edward is fascinated by the face in the mountain so much that he gazes into it daily. The more he ages, the more people recognize that Edward's face itself has taken on the features of the face in the mountain. When we are at worship, we so face God that we become shaped and formed by God. Even if we do not gather for worship, we must still worship. Our Council is going to be exploring ways to encourage and to help worship to happen while we are taking a hiatus from gathering for public worship. We will try to help one another keep worshiping in ways that bring comfort and spiritual sustenance and which shape our understanding of God, ourselves, and the needs of the hour.

God has been here ahead of us and has left us the Bible. The Bible is not a book of science. It is not a book of moral prescriptions. It is not a book of doctrinal principles. The Bible is rather a long record of a people's experience with God. Here is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). Here is how God has blessed and helped a people facing enemies before, be those enemies Pharaoh or Ahab or Nebuchadnezzar, or some inward fear. Here is the 23rd Psalmist, and he tells us he has been in the Valley of the Shadow of Death and God was there with him to comfort, strengthen, and guide. Here is Paul who has been in a first century dungeon – certainly not a place of comfort or kindness. Still Paul could say to the Philippians, "My God will supply every need of yours according to the riches of this glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). And here in this Bible is Luke, who has heard Jesus say, "Fear not, little flock, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (cf. Lk. 12:32).

God has been here ahead of us and has left us worship and the Bible. And God has left us prayer. Now prayer does not have to be well-crafted words of devotion. Moses, you will remember, heard God speaking at the burning bush. God said, "I have observed the misery of my people . . . ; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters . . . and I have come down to deliver them . . ." (Ex. 3:7, 8). That is Exodus 3. At the end of Exodus 2 we have the antecedent of what Moses heard at the burning bush. The antecedent is this, "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God" (Ex. 2:23). UCC Old Testament scholar and theologian points out that that groan wasn't shaped as a prayer or intended to be a prayer; it was just a groan. But God heard it as a prayer and it led God to act, to come down and deliver. Well now, we have this power of prayer and even our most indistinct prayers can be used to fight this enemy we are up against. God has left us the power of prayer.

God has left us an ethic of neighborliness. Care for our neighbors is at the heart of Christian ethics and is the mark of Christian behavior. Neighborliness out to rule out all selfish

hoarding. Neighborliness ought to call for compassion toward the most vulnerable in society. Neighborliness ought to eradicate every boundary of human origin. Had this been Youth Sunday as originally planned, the Youth would have led us in thinking about the Good Samaritan. That parable of Jesus reminds us that the neighbor we are called to help and to love is anyone without regard to status or station.

God has been here before and has left us worship, the Bible, the power of prayer, and the ethic of neighborliness. God has left us something else as well, and that is the community that is the church. The church is not something we attend. The church is not something we can close. The church is not something we can suspend. The church is something we are. Though we will not be gathering as the church for an indefinite period of time, we still need to find ways of being the church. That means finding ways to check in with one another, to care for one another, and to keep exercising a faithful mission in terms of finding ways to volunteer, to give to the food pantry, to give blood, and to maintain our stewardship. Though we may stop gathering as the church, this is no time to close the church. It is a time to be deployed as the church in mission as never before. Quaker philosopher and theologian Elton Trueblood once said the church is its most alive when its pews are empty and its people are out serving in mission. Our chance now while our pews will be empty is to prove that statement to be true.

One of the pieces of secular bravado bravely spoken at time like this proudly says we are a resilient people and will get through. True. Thank God. But pity us and our poor strength if that is all there is. Thankfully, there is more, much more. There is God and all God's wonder, and God has been here before.

Many years ago (1912) John Henry Jowett gave a course of lectures at Yale Divinity School to an audience of fledging preachers. In what he said at the close he may have been speaking about people going through a national emergency. Jowett said this to those fledging students, shaking in their boots about the work their future ministry would entail. He said, "Brethren . . . Your work is very difficult. Your Savior is very mighty. And the joy of the Lord will be your strength."

Standing in Jowett's hope and confidence, I say to you, My friends, the enemy is frightening. Your work is hard. But God has already been here and prepared a table for us in the presence of our enemy. So let us worship, if not in this way, then in new ways. Let us turn to our Bibles for the stories of faith so we can grow in faith. Let us pray, not because we have the words, but because God has the power. Let us practice our ethic of neighborliness, for if we lose neighborliness we lose society (Brueggemann). And let us be the community of the church beyond these walls, and so live in the love that casts out fear.