

A Sermon for Mothering Sunday, 20th March, 2020 by Gillian McGaughey, Lay Reader at Belfast Cathedral.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD – THAT’S ENOUGH!

Having listened to more Mothering Sunday sermons over the years than I care to admit I know that there are many paths down which a preacher can wander on the fourth Sunday of Lent.

The first is an unashamed celebration of mothers. The sermon that says “Mothers are wonderful! God loves Mothers!” This is absolutely true and such affirmation is important because in the midst of busy lives we can take our mothers for granted. Mother’s Day reminds us to say –by phone, skype or social media if those are the only means available to us -: “Thank you, I appreciate all that you do for me.”

For those of us lucky enough to still have our mothers with us that is fine but for those who have lost their mother or whose parent-child relationship is fractured it must make more difficult hearing.

The second type tells mothers how to be better mothers by being more like maternal role models in the bible such as Mary or Hannah. But mothers are human and sometimes such ideal role models can prompt feelings of inadequacy rather than inspiration. Some mothers will be so caught up with maintaining as normal a family life as possible in the current very abnormal times that they neglect to take care of themselves. For all those exhausted, frazzled mothers out there this morning please take some well-earned and overdue “Me-time”.

The third sermon we sometimes hear on Mother’s Day is one that has nothing to do with mothers. It includes affirmation and encouragement of mothers but is equally relevant to all those who now find themselves unable to be in the pews this Sunday but who still want to worship God in virtual communion with others.

Social distancing, self-isolation and the very real and present danger posed by Covid-19 ensure that this will be a very different kind of Mother’s Day. No church services. Gifts of flowers and chocolates left on doorsteps and family meals “shared “through Ipad and smartphones. So, I found myself looking to the readings for the fourth Sunday in Lent and discovered among them to my delight that the prescribed Psalm is the much loved and oft cited Psalm 23.

A mother’s love causes her to nurture her children. That nurture is expressed through a mother’s words, attitudes, judgements and her concern for others. I had never appreciated how vivid a description of how God parents us is articulated in Psalm 23 until preparing for this sermon. This Mothering Sunday let me encourage you to reflect afresh on its familiar and comforting words.

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want”

Being a shepherd is a round-the-clock job. The shepherd's role is to nurture the flock to help them grow and protect them from predators, helping them to grow from within and guarding them from attacks without. God does this for us every day offering us everything we need. His voice is louder than the voice of the world and his love and care are so overwhelming that he provides us with everything we require.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters”

In biblical times, the ground was prone to drought so it was sometimes hard for a shepherd to lead the flock to green pastures where they could eat nourishing food. These green pastures represent not only a place where we get physical food but also a place of rest. The flock had to drink from still waters because the sound of rushing water would scare the sheep and cause them to run. Many of us are scared and worried about how we protect our families or how we are going to pay the bills right now but if we let our Shepherd lead us, then we will not allow our stress to be our guide.

“He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake”

Even though we try our best we will all stray, sometimes just a bit and other times a great deal. God restores our soul, bringing us back to a place of stability in our minds, wills and emotions. When we choose to follow the Good Shepherd we know through prayer he will lead us to where we should go.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me”

Whether circumstances cause us to be in an intense dark period or our own poor choices got us there, we must know that we don't have to fear ultimate destruction because we have the comfort of knowing that he won't abandon us but will always be there to defend and direct us.

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over”

We have a Shepherd who prospers us abundantly in all places. The blessings he gives us will be evident to all, even our enemies.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever”

God, our Shepherd, will constantly give us good things and withhold the bad we deserve. And when we die, our lives will be even better because we get to spend eternity with God.

Corona virus has gone viral on social media. False facts, speculation and rumors have fanned the fears of many who seek certainty and reassurance. But the internet can also be an enormous force for good. It is the means by which we can join together in worship today reminding us that we are never alone in this time of trial.

It can also help us recall that that however fearful or worried we are right now there are many others who find themselves in much greater peril through no fault of their own. This week a friend on Facebook shared with me a Prayer for a Pandemic written by Cameron Bellm, a Seattle based mother of two small boys.

This prayer was originally posted on Cameron's website "**Krug the Thinker**" which is subtitled – "*Seeking the sacred in the everyday.*" It had such an impact among her followers that this morning it will be used in virtual acts of worship around the world. I share it with you with Cameron's blessing to use it in whatever form and forum may bring comfort to all those who hear or read it.

Prayer for a Pandemic

By Cameron Bellm

May we who are merely inconvenienced
Remember those whose lives are at stake.
May we who have no risk factors
Remember those most vulnerable.
May we who have the luxury of working from home
Remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.
May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close
Remember those who have no options.
May we who have to cancel our trips
Remember those that have no safe place to go.
May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market
Remember those who have no margin at all.
May we who settle in for a quarantine at home
Remember those who have no home.
As fear grips our country, let us choose love.
During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other,
Let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbours.
Amen.

In case you are wondering the title for this sermon comes from a story I found on the internet. Years ago, long before the digital age, when Saturday newspapers carried sermon topics for the next day, Rev. R. I. Williams of Fairmont Park Methodist Church of

Norfolk, Virginia picked up the phone and called the local newspaper to give them his sermon topic. "The Lord is my Shepherd," he said.

The person on the other end said, "Is that all," and Rev. Williams said, "That's enough."

The next day the church page carried his sermon topic as "The Lord is my Shepherd—That's Enough!"

A happy and healthy Mothering Sunday to us all.

Gillian McGaughey