

## A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*The Closeness of Christ*

John 9

March 22, 2020

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

So begins the prayer that speaks for so many people across generations, putting into words what we discover again when we have no where else to turn-to God's care and healing. We rest in God. *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.* The shepherds rod and staff symbolize God's presence and that God will protect and guide his sheep through dangers so big the sheep can't begin to comprehend and those hidden they can't even see.

Psalm 23, a prayer for this day with all we've gone through in the last week and unsure of what may come in the week ahead. On this day of rest, we need to hear that word again on this Sabbath day, The Lord is our shepherd.

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky Baptist poet-farmer needed such a word when he wrote his poem *The Peace of Wild Things*. In the poem, the speaker expresses the sleepless anxiety and frantic worry that he shares with many of us now 50 years later. He describes it in phrases I've heard all week:

...despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be...

These are just some of the feelings we have, those of us who have had time to even attend to our feelings. It's an utterly strange moment this one, a cauldron of anxiety and normalcy, a work week where everything is the same yet it's all different. Turn on the lights, but no one can come in the store. Do your work, but do it completely different than you've ever done it before. Teach the class, but to a computer screen. Love your neighbor, but don't go for a visit. Receive all as Jesus, as the Benedictines say, but don't crack the door too wide. Greet them from a distance. Eat sacramentally, but eat alone.

This is a world none of us have ever known before. I was a young pastor on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, but even though I'd only been pastoring a few years by then, I knew what to do then. We knew how to be church. Our ecclesiological instincts took over. Get on the phones. Call a prayer meeting. For tonight. Tonight we pray. We mourn. We read Lamentations. We hug one another. Football was postponed for a while, but we had church. On Sunday, we had a packed church. We talked about the call of Jesus to love our enemies and confessed to one another how hard that was at that moment.

And we had a baptism. I baptized a man and a girl that Sunday into the church, into faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. We were all baptized by the tears falling off our faces. We didn't know then that we should call it sacramental, but the room hummed with the Spirit. I didn't see tongues of flame, but supernatural electricity charged the air. We were part of it. You hear the seriousness of our faith in new ways in the days after 9/11 when you hear the words, "When you are baptized into Christ Jesus, you are baptized into his death, and raised to walk in the newness of life."

They said the world changed that week; we walked out blinking into the September Sun that Sunday afternoon spiritually ready for whatever it meant for us to walk in the newness of Christ's life in us. This situation now poses utterly new challenges. All our ecclesial, theological, spiritual, communal instincts in crisis—to be together, to break the bread, to greet a friend, to pray together—all have to be checked. We have to be still. The church is empty. It is quiet.

Goodness knows that doesn't mean there's not work to be done. Some of you have worked harder in this last week than you've had to in a long time, doing things you don't really want to do in ways you don't really want to do it. We see you. You're not working for a paycheck or a grade. You're working for a cause, for your clients, your customers, your students, your neighbors. You're working for your calling. Keep it up. Discover again the joy of creative, adaptive work and remembering again what is most important to do. And then, go home and rest. You're going to be great. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.

Some of you would love to have the work you had two weeks ago. Doors are locked, clients are gone, customers are home, students are barred. You still have a calling, or at least you had work, and now what? We see you. You're worried and understandably so. We're in a medical crisis we're just beginning to fear and an economic crisis we haven't begun to comprehend. Keep your hope up. You're not alone. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.

Some of you are home alone. During the week, we can make it, but Sunday morning, as Johnny Cash sang, can be a particularly lonely time. We see you. You're not alone. You are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and the love of your community. God is with you. I hope you feel his presence. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy.

Some of you are at home now with 2 year olds and 4 years olds whose boundless energy is really great . . . in short doses. I got nothing for you. Lots of luck! But be gracious with yourself. You're a good parent. You're not alone. A sense of humor, patience, and creativity go a long, long way. Be present to your children. They may look back on this as one of the best seasons of their lives. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.

We learn when we're distanced from so much that fills our lives that we're not as much in control as we thought we were. Have you noticed in Psalm 23 that God is the actor in

almost every single line? The only actions we have are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, not fearing, and dwelling in the house of the Lord. The only verbs that belong to us are walking where we don't want to walk, keeping fear at bay from controlling us, and holding on to the hope of dwelling in God's house forever. All the other verbs are God's. God is the actor. We are acted upon.

You, Lord, make me lie down in green pastures.  
You lead me beside still waters.  
You restore my soul.  
You lead me in right paths.  
You are with us.  
You comfort us.  
You prepare a table for us.  
You anoint us.  
Your goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives.

I think this is the sacramental magic of this psalm. After everything, in everything, through everything, we just lean into God's strength. God's strength is perfect when our strength is gone. We just rest in him. We just have to trust him and be still. That is Sabbath.

It was a Sabbath day when Jesus met the blind man in John 9. The blind man embodies crisis: medical (he was blind), social (everyone else only saw him as a burden), economic (he could only beg for alms to make it through the day). In the face of the crises embodied by his life, everyone else only saw the trouble and the limits and the problems. They only looked for who to blame and why there couldn't be a solution. Jesus, as he always did, saw through it all. He said, "As long as I am in the world, I am the Light of the World." And Jesus touched him. He touched his eyes. And the man could see for the first time.

There are many icons of this biblical scene. In every one of them, Jesus touches the man. Some icons and art show Jesus reaching out to touch him at arms length, but I like ones like the one we've shared this morning, the Coptic version. Jesus is up close and personal. There's no daylight between him and the blind man. No social distancing, no medical distancing, no economic distancing. Jesus is right there with him in the crisis. When everyone else is gone, Jesus is there—close.

At a moment when we're so out of control but have so much to do . . .  
At a moment when we feel so responsible but also so vulnerable . . .  
At a moment when we feel so small but that our careless actions can have such consequences . . .  
At a moment when we're blind to the future but need to see our neighbors clearly . . .

This image of Jesus is so hopeful. He is still this close to you and me in our crises and our need. We need his healing touch on our eyes, on our hearts, on our hands, on our communities.

Jesus saw him. Jesus sees you. He sees right where you are right now. He sees you. And he's coming. He's coming to you. And nothing will keep him from finding you, not distance, not your doubts or your worries, not your stress or your burdens, not your frustrations. He sees you, and he is with you.

Wendell Berry's poem, *Peace of Wild Things*, like Psalm 23, turns from despair to trust, finding peace through the grace of green pastures and the stillness of waters wherever they may be found:

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

This is a world none of us have ever known, and we may be in this for a while. Let us learn to be still—to still our bodies, to quiet our minds, to soften our hearts. We may just find our eyes opened to the God who is always closer than we realized, and find his comfort in rod and staff and grace.

Amen.

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Benediction

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you.  
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.  
May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

May the Lord take your minds and think through them.

May the Lord take your lips and speak through them.  
May the Lord take your hearts and set them on fire.  
For the world is too big for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

May the peace of Christ be with you this day and in the days to come. Amen.