

“Living in the Shadow of the Cross”

The Right Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton

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Lent 4, Year A

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

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

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

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.

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

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. (Psalm 23, King James Version)

Above the rood screen in the nave of the National Cathedral, there is a huge wooden crucifix at the top of it with our Lord's mother Mary and Mary Magdalene standing at his side, gazing at the slumping body of Jesus hanging on the cross. It is a moving scene, one that I would gaze at every time I worshiped in that magnificent space. But what really caught my eye from the vantage point of my chair was what was *behind* the cross...the lights in the nave cast a huge shadow of that crucifixion scene on the ceiling behind it. I would sometimes find myself looking several minutes at the darkened image on that ceiling, and sometimes I tried to avert my eyes from looking at it. For it was the “shadow” of the cross that haunted me...and probably the world as well. You see, we all live in the shadow of the cross, although it's not something we pay much attention to in our daily lives.

We are in the season of Lent, the time in the church year that Christians reflect on what it means to live in the shadow of the cross. It began 3 ½ weeks ago when a member of the clergy made a dark ashen sign of the cross on our foreheads saying, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Little did we know then that less than a month after Ash Wednesday those words have become more fearfully real for us than we had realized then, as now most of the world has been thrown into *fear*: fear of the dust, fear of darkness and death.

The lectionary readings for this fourth Sunday in Lent speak of shadows, of light and darkness, of finding the light in the midst of the murkiness of life.

- Ephesians 5:8-9 – “Once you were in darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.”
- John 9: - Jesus said, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”
- But it is the assigned psalm that captures my attention today, one of the most known and beloved of all of them, the 23rd Psalm...(read the psalm)

Notice the verbs in the Psalm; they are active verbs, not passive. The Lord makes us rest in green pastures, the Lord leads us beside still waters, the Lord restores us, leads, comforts, prepares and anoints. The Lord does all the heavy lifting in this psalm! And what is our task here, the one active verb for us in the psalm? We are to “walk” in that valley of the shadow of death: we don't rest in that valley, we don't shrink in fear in that valley, we don't succumb to hysteria and panic in that valley, we don't cut ourselves completely off from our neighbors, friends and family in

that valley. No, we *walk*. In the face of suffering and pain, the people of God fueled by the Holy Spirit get up...we don't paralyzed with fear. As for resting, yes, we "rest" in God daily in prayer. But in this world, and more importantly in our communities right now, something more than our individual private prayers is required.

For today, living in a world ravaged by the sickness, death and destruction caused by the COVID-19 coronavirus, we are all walking "in the valley of the shadow of death." What does that mean? It means recognizing that the life we live here on earth, stranded between the crucifixion and the resurrection, is marked by imperfection. It's living in the midst of suffering, illness, poverty, violence, injustice and death.

But there's work to do if you are a person of faith. To be with and follow Jesus today, you've got to pick up your mat and walk. Of course, that is just an image to be active, to participate in a mission, not a literal statement that you must be physically able to walk. No, walking in the valley of the shadow death means doing whatever we can to grow, nurture and support *life* in that valley. Even during this time when we should be staying at home as much as possible for the health and safety of everyone, "walking in this valley" still means finding ways to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, reach out to the lonely, protect the children and the elderly, and care for the sick. This is the diaconal ministry which we are being called to focus our energies on in in this troubled time.

Remember what I'm calling the three "stay-c's" – stay calm, stay connected, stay church - that will get you through these stressful times:

1. **Stay calm.** Don't give in to fear, despair and anger. We are all stressed and on edge to some extent, so try to take a deep breath before flying off the handle emotionally at every little thing that doesn't go well. Give yourself a break – and give others a break, too. Make a special effort these days to be as Jesus was in that boat when his disciples were crippled in fear, when after resting in God he said, "Peace...be still." Stay calm.
2. **Stay connected.** If your church live streams its services, turn on your laptops, tablets or mobile phones and join in. Let us know if your parish needs help getting started. But if your congregation cannot for any reason livestream at this time, then always know that you can join in to your Cathedral church's services every Sunday and during Holy Week – and I've encouraged your clergy to consider NOT having to put on every Holy Week liturgy, but instead encourage their church members to join with the whole diocese in the live-streamed services from here. For those of you at home who are just not technologically equipped to log on to any service, you can do two things: 1) rejoice that your Church is still providing worship services, and you can pray for them even as they are worshipping online, and 2) You can still pick up the phone and stay connected that way. Call your priest or deacon; pray with them on the phone. Call someone in the church to let them know you were thinking about them. Check in with family members and loved ones near and far. Find new and creative ways to connect, and stay connected.
3. **Stay "Church".** We are reminded more than ever in this crisis of something that we always "knew", but never fully realized until now: that "the church is not the building." We, the people, are the church! The present crisis is forcing us to return to our roots as a church, not defining ourselves as tied to a particular sanctuary, but as a people building a holy sanctuary within. If we stay calm and stay connected with one another, we will find

that our church, our congregation, no matter how small or large, will grow stronger in this period, not weaker. Staying church means that we, in the words of the Eucharistic prayer, will find many ways to remain “fervent in prayer and in works of mercy, and renewed by God’s Word and Sacraments.” We will focus this season of not having to receive the Sacrament, but on “*being Sacrament*” for others in our congregations, in our families, and in our communities.

Several years ago, on a cold rainy afternoon in Rome, Italy, I was with a group of choir members on a pilgrimage led by my wife, singing through Italy. We were crowded into a cold damp room in the Catacombs outside the city walls. We were reading scriptures, praying and singing songs there as we did a service of the Commemoration of All Faithful Departed. We were surrounded by the bones of those who had gone before, almost two thousand years ago; their bodies were now dust. But they, those unknown early Christians, were alive! There in the flickering candlelit shadows, we felt their presence and found ourselves rejoicing in the catacombs of the dead even as we recited Psalm 23: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I WILL FEAR NO EVIL, FOR THOU O GOD ARE WITH ME.” We remembered that for Christians, death’s shadow casts no fear.

To live in the cross’ shadow is not the same thing as “living in darkness”, which is living into our own shadows. For the cross is ultimately a symbol of victory, not defeat for us. At the cross is all the pain, all the suffering, all the senseless death and destruction, all the injustices of life...and God takes it all on upon Himself.

“In the shadow of death may we not look back to the past, but seek in utter darkness the dawn of God.” *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*

Finally, did you know that yesterday, March 21, was World Poetry Day? Poets help us to see with an economy of words what we sometimes cannot see or name. This one has been shared recently by many around the world, a poem of hope for what we are going through right now.

A poem by Kitty O’Meara, “*And the People Stayed Home*”

“And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

“And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

“And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.”

Amen.