



South Elkhorn Christian Church
Digital Liturgy

EASTERTIDE

May 10, 2020

PREPARE

Locate a candle to light and communion elements to use (bread/juice or whatever is available to you).

Find a quiet place by yourself or with others.

Read through the instructions, prayers, scripture, and questions below. You can also find a guided, voice-led version of this digital liturgy at southelkhorncc.org/digital-liturgy

WELCOME THE LIGHT

Welcome to worship with South Elkhorn Christian Church. Light a candle if you are able and receive these words:

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Lord is our shepherd,
We are Christ's beloved.
The Shepherd sits us down in green pastures,
In Christ, we are at peace and secure.
The shepherd leads us beside still waters,
Christ restores our soul.

CENTERING & LORD'S PRAYER

Prayer inspired by words found at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2017/04/a-prayer-for-mothers-day.html>

Let us pray:

Lord, we remember the mothers of Scripture
who are a part of our story,
For their courage, faith, and fierceness,
we thank you.

Lord, we remember the mothers
who have gone before us, or are with us still,
For their love, sacrifice, struggle, and joy,
we thank you.

Lord, we remember those who have not given birth to us,
but are like mothers to us.
For their gifts of love, compassion, and comfort,
we thank you.

Lord, we remember women today who struggle to smile.
For those who have lost children,
And those who are longing to be a mother.
We lift them up to you, trusting you will be with them in their pain.

Lord, we remember that you are God that comforts us and holds us close.
Your love surrounds us and supports us.

May we mindful of your constant presence, even when walk through the dark valleys,

Lord, we remember that you are the Shepherd, who also gently guides us beside still waters,

And restores our souls.

For we are grateful and give you thanks.

And now hear us as we say the prayer Jesus that taught, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 23

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.

SERMON

“I’m right here. I’m right here.”

I instinctively speak those words when I step into the cry-filled room of my youngest, just a few months old now. I walk into his room and speak the words in that hushed parental tone, “I’m right here, I’m right here.”

And it seems almost every time there is a surprising mid-wail pause, even if just for a moment. Sometimes I’m surprised how quickly and suddenly the cries subside altogether.

No matter what infant crisis is going on, hungry, soiled diaper, pacifier dropped, tired of being in a crib and just wanting to be up and see the world; it seems that no matter the infant crisis, just knowing there is a loving presence has an immediate impact, a calming, reassuring, transforming effect.

You and I, we aren’t infants anymore. But some things remain true, even as we grow. Perhaps some things become more true as we grow.

You are different when you sense the loving presence of another. The loving presence of another person changes you, changes me, changes us.

At the heart of Psalm 23 is a deep trust, an intimate, personal, profound confidence in God’s “I’m right here.”

And if we are careful, we might notice how the “I’m right here” moment changes the Psalmist.

In this Psalm there are 26 words that lead to a climactic confession, and then 26 words that follow. Yes, quite literally, in the very middle of the Psalm is its very theological heart: the words, “for you are with me.”

In the first 26 words, the Psalmist speaks in the 3rd person, speaks about God. “The Lord is... He leads me... he restores...”

And that’s about right. Isn’t it?

Most of us, most of the time, live and work and play in, at best, a third-person relationship *about* God. If we speak of God at all, we speak *about* God. We think of God at all, we think *about* God. If we read of God at all, we read *about* God.

God exists.

God is love.

God is good.

God is still at work.

And that’s not something we should be ashamed of. Indeed, it is part of the Psalmist’s journey. And it needs to be a part of our faith adventure. It matters that we speak honestly about our understanding of God, that we think deeply and truthfully with others about God, that we read richly and attentively about God, listening and learning from the experiences of others.

Indeed, it’s in this third-person phase that the Psalmist provides us with some powerful, enduring images and understandings about God.

I was particularly moved by verse 2... The Lord “restores my soul.”

Or, in Hebrew, The Lord “gives me my life back.”

That’s what we are aching for right now, isn’t it?

This pandemic disruption and disaster has us clamoring for the way things were... we are looking for whatever stability or predictability we enjoyed before... we are longing for the human touch and contact we had before... we are aching for religious gatherings to resume, sports to kickoff once more, businesses to bustle again...

I just want my hair to know the sweet sound of scissors again...

Perhaps that's what we mean when we speak of a new "normal." We are looking for that life from before this pandemic--sure we won't soon forget this trouble, and be impacted in some way by it, but can't we get back to some version of "normal"?

God, when will you give us our life back?

Perhaps this Psalm is just what we need to hear in this moment of aching for normalcy, of desiring our lives back. After all, this is a Psalm calibrated for crisis. We are, in a way, walking that dark valley the Psalmist speaks of, a valley shadowed with death, disruption, and disaster.

But here's the thing... God doesn't promise to give us our lives back as they were before--not even close. The Psalmist doesn't find an old normal or even a new normal. There's no normal at all... there's something else...

And to get there, the Psalmist shifts out of third-person faith...

You see one of the snares we face on our faith journey is getting stuck in the first half of this Psalm, getting stuck in a third-person faith, a faith that doesn't become personal.

Now, growing up I heard all the time, over and over and over again that faith was personal. Unfortunately, I misunderstood that to mean it was private. I don't think I'm alone in mistaking private for personal, simply synonyms meaning the same thing... But here's what I've seen in the stories of Jesus, in the life of Paul, in the courage of countless saints of the church: their faith was not a private affair, not something they just kept to themselves, it was not something inconsequential to others, meant just for them, irrelevant to public life or public policies; it wasn't even shielded from polite conversation.

Faith is anything but private. It profoundly shapes, impacts, and energizes our shared life with others. Our faith is meant to be sorted out, struggled with, lived out, and enriched in community and conversation with others.

And here's the thing, in private you can still have a very impersonal, third-person faith...

Indeed, it's when we store away our faith into the private domain, untouched by others, that our faith is most at risk of becoming impersonal.

What makes faith personal is not that it is "none of your business" and "just what I think

about God” but instead what the Psalmist boldly declares, “You are with me.”

A personal faith is one that shifts from “about God” to “with God.”

“I’m right here,” God seems to say. And the Psalmist finally responds, “Ah yes, you are with me.”

For the rest of the Psalm, we no longer hear of God in the third person... now the Psalmist speaks in the second-person.

“Your rod, your staff, they comfort me.”

“You prepare a table...”

“You anoint my head...”

The Psalmist finds and trusts the personal presence of God in that dark valley, and that changes everything. It changes how the Psalmist speaks. It changes what the psalmist experiences. And it changes what the Psalmist does.

The psalmist sits down at a table prepared by God in the presence of enemies. That’s odd. As soon as restaurants open up for business, my first thought is not, “let’s see who has it in for me and let’s dine with them...” I’m thinking about my family, my friends who I miss, you know, “normal.” It might be new because I have to wear a mask or sit further from other patrons... but it will be normal, because I’ll dine with friends, not enemies.

But that’s not what the Psalmist finds.

As if that isn’t strange enough, then the Psalmist declares that goodness and mercy will follow him. That might not seem as odd as it is in Hebrew--the word we read in English as “followed” is better translated “pursued”... In other Psalms we read repeatedly about enemies pursuing... but not here, the world has been flipped on its head; normal is a world where enemies are the pursuers; but in a world anchored by God’s personal presence, the pursuit is God’s blessing and beauty, mercy and goodness.

That’s not an old normal. That’s not a new normal. That’s just not what we take for normal.

Instead, it’s an entirely new world.

When the psalmist senses and personally trusts the presence of God--“You are with me,” the psalmist then discovers an entirely different way the world can work, indeed an entirely new world.

You see this kind of trust isn't normal... What's normal is people sowing the seeds of distrust in us, it's people giving us every reason to remain distrustful, it's hunkering down in skepticism, cynicism, and selfishness.

Maybe what we need isn't a new normal, especially when what passes for normal is often a broken reality for so many. Maybe what we need to prepare for is a new world; a more just, a more loving, a more inclusive world. A world structured for mercy and goodness, for God's upside-down blessing and beauty; rather than the greed, blaming, punishment and revenge that parades as normal, that is accepted as "just the way the world works".

Maybe what we need to prepare for is not a new normal of exploitation, exhaustion, escapism; but instead a new world of green pasture nourishment and still-water renewal.

A world that might only come to be, when we learn to trust again...

That closing line of Psalm 23, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord always," reads literally in Hebrew, "I will continue to return to God's presence my whole life long." That's the adventure of faith--returning our attention, again, and again, and again to the personal God who remains present with us no matter what, even and especially in dark valleys shadowed by death; even there, we can trust.

Maybe the problem isn't that we lost our life when we lost our normal, it's that in our normal we missed out on what life really is: drawing close and trusting the God who will take us far from normal, releasing us into what we could never have thought possible before.

COMMUNION

Place before you bread and a cup of juice (or whatever you have on hand to use). If you are with others, serve one another with the blessing, “The bread of life, the cup of hope.”

The Lord be with you,

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord.

It is right to give God thanks and praise.

The communion elements before you unite us in Christ’s Spirit one to another. Christ’s life, death, and resurrection unite us to God’s infinite and all-inclusive Love. All are welcome to the Table, and all are invited to remember...

THE BREAD

“The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it...”

Hold the bread and, if possible, break it.

“...and said, ‘This is my body which is for you, do this in remembrance of me.’”

THE CUP

Hold the cup. If you have not already, pour juice (or whatever you have on hand) into the cup.

“After supper, Jesus took the cup saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.’”

PRAYER

Gracious and Loving God, You have made us for connection. In this time of separation and isolation send to us your Spirit. That we might experience your sustaining presence and be encouraged with hope through the fellowship of your love. Amen.

Receive and prayerfully enjoy the bread and the cup.

GENEROSITY

Prayerfully consider someone to reach out to with a word of love, encouragement, or prayer. Write a card. Make a phone call. Or identify a time to do so today (or in the week ahead).

Tithes and offerings can be mailed to South Elkhorn or you can give online at

southelkhorncc.org/give

CHANGING THE LIGHT

Now it is time to change the light. The light that was in one place at one time, is now in all places at all times.

In this very room and everywhere we go. And all God's children said, Amen.

Extinguish the candle and watch the smoke rise.

UPDATES

Visit southelkhorncc.org/blog to learn the latest on worship, building usage, and more.

Digital Worship & Wonder videos available at southelkhorncc.org/worship-wonder.

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