



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS  
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

LENT IV

PSALM 23  
JOHN 9

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS  
MARCH 22, 2020

*'You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me.'*

It is an almost reflexive response in the midst of suffering or fear to ask the question 'Where is God?' When the bottom falls out and we lose all sense of control, churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike immediately try to place how an unchanging God fits into a chaotic and fluid world.

In John 9, Jesus and his disciples encounter a man born blind, the disciples ask 'Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

By asking this question, the disciples are trying to place God in the timeline of this man's personal suffering and disability, and they settle for putting God at the start of the events in question.

'This man is blind, therefore he is being punished for something he did wrong. We can make sense of this man's loss and struggle by believing that God caused this tragedy as punishment for sin; God did this and it's somebody's fault.'

This view certainly still has legs, largely in a personal context. If you're anything like me, you've asked 'Why me? Why now?' when tragedy strikes your life, feeling as if God were rendering judgement on your personal moral failings.

The other common alternative to God's place in the midst of suffering is at the end of a timeline of events, rather than the beginning. Rather than causing the trials and tribulations, God will serve as a *deus ex machina*, descending suddenly and unexpectedly to save the day and make everything right. I've seen this particularly when talking to the family members of someone in the hospital. "We just have to believe that God will make all of this better, right pastor?"

There are times when it feels like deliverance arrives in the nick of time and God has saved the day. There are times when no apparent resolution ever arrives, no matter how hard we pray.

And there are times where the results are mixed.

Look at the blind man healed by Jesus. He regains his eyesight but is immediately persecuted by the religious authorities and excommunicated from the synagogue. His deliverance only leads to another trial.

Where is God then, in the midst of our suffering? If God neither directly causes our pain as punishment, nor causes our suffering to end as we might ask, where do we put God in all the suffering of a world which feels like it has turned upside down?

I found myself transfixed by the 23rd Psalm appointed for today as I thought about this question and our particular experience right now as a parish. Where is God in a world where sickness spreads, economies fall, and we cannot even gather together physically as members of the body of Christ, a world in which there possibly may be no public gatherings to celebrate Easter when it comes?

The answer the Psalmist gives is that God is in the thick of it with us. Verse 4:

Though I walk through the valley of the  
shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

These words feel uniquely appropriate for our time; that even in the midst of the shadow of Death, God remains faithful and present. Note that God's presence does not mean that we get to avoid this valley of shadow, but rather, we are not alone when the time comes. And then, the Psalmist goes further:

You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me.

Or in another translation

You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.

What gall! What defiance!

The assurance that even when all the darkness is gathered at our doorstep, when the world feels threatening and unsure, that our sense of security and familiarity are shattered God stops, and prepares a banquet, a place of abundance, belonging, and sustenance for us.

Not after the battle is won as a reward for being faithful; not as a brief reprieve when things slow

down and we catch our breath. In the very face of everything which threatens us now with harm and loss and fear, God is present with everything that we could possibly need. In the midst of famine, God's Love presents us with abundance. In the midst of darkness, God's Light shines and is not overcome.

This is why we rejoice this fourth Sunday in Lent; not because we are in denial, but because we are defiantly hopeful. We know that even when Calvary and the cross loom large, resurrection is just on the other side.

Remember during the last Sunday of Epiphany, when we read about the Transfiguration and I stressed to you the words of Peter:

You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

I urged you to cling to that Epiphany light as we enter the darkness of the desert together. Little did I know that we would need it as much as we do know.

So now, amidst the fear and uncertainty of these dark days lift that lamp, and see before you a table spread, in the face of all that would threaten you, there is abundance. There is welcome.

God is here.

AMEN

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