

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 15, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: Psalm 23

Theme: Bless the Lives We Actually Have: Blessed Are Those Who Feel Alone

[prayer]

Psalm 23 is one of our most iconic and treasured pieces of Scripture. It is read most frequently at funerals, which is ironic because it is not a psalm for the dead. It is a psalm for the living. Psalm 23 is a confession of faith, a testimony, a declaration of confidence in God. Originally, it was meant to be read alongside Psalm 22. Jesus quotes that psalm on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1; Matt 27:46). Psalm 22 is a plea for deliverance; Psalm 23 is the answer to that plea. Though the psalmist suffers greatly, he is assured of the presence of God in his “valley of the shadow of death.”

The Common English Bible uses “the darkest valley” but “the valley of the *shadow* of death” is the closer translation of the two. There are seasons in our lives when death casts a long shadow over us. The shadow of war, the shadow of illness, the shadow of depression and despair – these and more are the servants of death. We walk in the brightest sunlight, until the sun is hidden behind a cloud or a mountain, and the way forward is suddenly plunged into deep shadow. So it is with our lives, subject to forces beyond our control.

My strongest memory of reciting Psalm 23 was in an assisted living community. I was shadowing the community’s chaplain, and she invited me to observe her weekly worship service on the dementia ward. The residents were all suffering from degrees of memory loss. Some were still bright eyed if a little confused; others were sunk deep inside themselves. I remember my sense of awe and wonder when, as the chaplain began to recite Psalm 23, the entire congregation, even the otherwise nonverbal members of the flock, joined her word for word. In dementia sufferers become irrevocably lost inside themselves. And yet this short psalm of confidence in God’s provision had the power to lead them out of the

dark labyrinths of their memories and temporarily unite them in the light of praise and prayer. It was a minor miracle to behold; I will never forget it.

“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.”

When the shepherd leads his flock through the valley, the sheep have the low ground, while predators command the slopes on either side. Danger and death loom over the flock. But the sheep are not afraid because they trust the shepherd to provide for their well-being. The shepherd knows the way out of the valley. The shepherd carries a staff to fight off the preying beasts. The presence of the shepherd comforts the sheep and fills them with confidence.

Shepherds are masters of the ministry of presence. They spend their days providing for the needs of their flock – green pastures for grazing and fresh water for drinking – but the most important thing they provide is their watchful presence. To say that the Lord is our shepherd is to claim that God’s goodness flows from God’s very presence. This goodness has nothing to do with our circumstances. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because wherever we go, Jesus goes, too. As another favorite psalm proclaims, “You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways...You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me” (Psalm 139:3, 5).

Whenever and wherever the shadow of death falls upon you, friends, you can trust that God is already there. There is no place that we can go that God has not already gone. God makes a way before us, even to and through the moment of our deaths. God may not circumvent the valley of the shadow of death, but God will always, always walk ahead, alongside, and behind us as we journey through the shadows. We are not abandoned or forsaken. Instead, God gives us the grace of His presence. That is the most extravagant gift God can give – the gift of Godself.

We are currently suffering through an epidemic of loneliness in our country. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, at least sixty percent of Americans report feeling alone and that number rises to seventy-five percent for young people.¹ Loneliness is more life-threatening than cancer, because when we are isolated

¹ <https://share.google/YHkAkWxX7a7r4k2Jw>

from each other, every other kind of suffering is compounded. We become cut off from the compassion and help of others.

The causes of our loneliness are varied – social anxiety, mental and physical health, caregiving requirements, demanding schedules, discrimination, poverty, and violence. Pure proximity to people is not the antidote to loneliness; meaningful, supportive relationships are. The church can and should be part of this antidote. Together we are the Body of Christ on the earth. Our fellowship and communion with each other is the primary way God communicates His presence and grace to the world. If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and we are His body, then we have been called to shepherd the world. We are called to be a community of care that nurtures belonging. *All means all*. Our emphasis on inclusion here at CUMC is not about being politically provocative. It is a reminder that God has called us to the work of radical hospitality, where every person finds their place in the household of God.

At the end of Psalm 23, the metaphor shifts from God as a shepherd to God as host. God sets a lavish table for the psalmist in the presence of the people and things that would do him harm. The psalmist's cup overflows with living water. God marks the psalmist as His own and seals upon him the blessings of God's table.

The greatest blessing of that table is the blessing of community. Again, I recall the experience of reciting Psalm 23 on the dementia ward. There was the miracle of sacred words emerging from disease-stricken minds. And there was also the miracle of community, of spiritual communion, even in the valley of the shadow of death.

For "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..." Follow is too passive a word to describe the intensity and intimacy of God's presence. *Pursue* is more accurate. Surely goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me all the days of my life. Surely goodness and mercy shall *pursue you* all the days of your life.

Jesus has told us, "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11). The Good Shepherd seeks and finds the one who is alone. Jesus leaves the ninety-nine to pursue the one and bring them home ((Matt 18:12–14; Luke 15:3–7). The Good Shepherd knows every sheep in his flock in intimate detail. He calls us by name and welcomes us into the fold of God, where nothing will ever separate us (Rom 8:38-

39). The assurance of God's unyielding faithfulness is brought to completion in the community of God's people. It is together, as the family of God, at God's table, that we are reminded that we belong to God and to each other.

Mere days before his crucifixion, Jesus is in the house of Simon the leper in Bethany. An unnamed woman approaches him and tenderly pours a jar of perfume on his head. Anointing with oil or perfume is a sign of divine favor normally reserved for kings. Perhaps this is how the woman intended her expensive gift – to honor Jesus as the Messiah, which means God's Anointed One. But Jesus receives her gift as a different kind of anointing – the anointing a dead body is given in preparation for burial. This anointing is a foreshadowing of the lengths that God will go so that we can be confident in his promise: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20, KJV).

As part of Holy Communion today we will also be offering the rite of anointing. You will be invited to come forward and be anointed with oil on your forehead or your hands. For those worshiping at home, I encourage you to fill a small dish with olive oil to bless and anoint yourself and your household.

This anointing is an opportunity to reaffirm that God is with each one of us. Perhaps you are living in death's shadow, and you need to be reminded you are not alone. Or perhaps you are accompanying someone else through their time of shadow, and you seek strength for the journey. Maybe you are climbing out of the valley, and your soul is filled with a testimony of gratitude and renewed faith. Or maybe you are just weary or sad or lonely and you need a reminder that you are loved. Wherever you are today, this anointing is for you; it will meet you there.

Blessed are those who feel alone...for they shall belong to the household of God.

Amen.

[Quote portion of St. Patrick's Breastplate as benediction]

I arise today

*Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the Threeness,
Through confession of the Oneness
of the Creator of creation...*

*Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.*

I arise today

*Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the Threeness,
Through confession of the Oneness
of the Creator of creation.*