

I'd like to begin by wishing my mother a Happy Mothering Sunday in England. It's the middle Sunday of Lent. In England, that's always Mother's Day. My mother's been a faithful viewer of our services for a couple of years, and last week she was joined by over 150 households watching online as we live streamed our service. Sadly, this week we can't be inside the church live streaming, but we're doing the best we can in bringing you this service under all the constraints that there are.

So I'm out here with no congregation to preach, which is an odd situation, but it is something that I've done before. When I was interviewing, or in the process of interviewing, for the job here at St. James, Lee Wagner from the vestry came out to see me. He was on the calling committee and he sat me down and he said, "Mark, there's two of you in the running for this post. Your rival," he said, "has got a large internet presence. He's got sermons, talks, blogs out there." He said, "When I looked you up on the internet, all that came up was you doing an Elvis impersonation at a parish party," so I took the hint and gathered ... my Church Warden was a cameraman, and we spent an afternoon in the church one Sunday, and we recorded a whole load of sermons.

I was very concerned to change the color of my robes, so it looked as if these were coming over a period of time, but actually they were done one after the other one Sunday afternoon, but it seemed to work okay because here I am four years later speaking to you outside St. James.

I want to offer some thoughts on the Psalm set for today, that very familiar Psalm, perhaps the most famous Psalm of all, Psalm 23. I found it helpful over the last couple of days to look at these familiar words in the context of this very unfamiliar surroundings.

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want."

I don't know about you, but I've been wanting lots of things recently and not being able to get them. Last week, I went into four different supermarkets in search of an onion, all without luck. In the fourth supermarket, I had a bit of a turn, and because I was unable to buy what I really wanted, I bought

whatever I could. I bought a crate of beer, not because I needed beer, but just because there was beer on the shelves. And then I bought pork ribs. I've never eaten pork ribs in my life, but that was the only meat that there was on the shelf. I didn't even bother looking for hand sanitizer. Who'd have thought that the humble cheap hand sanitizer would be worth its weight in gold like it is today?

This whole crisis is raising lots of important questions such as, "What do we want? What do we really need? What do we value?" Things have changed values significantly in recent weeks. Things that looked so valuable and important last month have lost their allure, and other things have emerged as things of real and true value. We see the Old Testament reading, which Laura will bring to us in a moment, that God's values have never been aligned with the way of the world. When choosing a king, God chose David from amongst the sons of Jesse, even though he didn't look to be the obvious choice. In fact, his father, Jesse, didn't even bring him in for Samuel to look at. "He's out with the sheep," he said. "Don't bother with him," but God saw things differently. God sees things differently. God values different things. God looked at the heart, we're told elsewhere. God looked into David's heart and saw that he was a man after his own heart and knew that he was the man he wanted to be king because God's values weren't the same values as others who were looking for a king.

With everything off kilter as it is now, we have the opportunity to see things differently, to look at things more as God sees them. Let's be examining our values in this context. How are we seeing things? What do we want? What do we need? What's of real value?

And hear this line from the middle of the psalm, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil." There is much talk of fear at the moment. The Governor of New York said this, "This is a public health crisis, but more than that is the fear. The panic is a bigger problem than the virus." Fear is a powerful motivator and energizer, and not all fear is bad. It's fear of catching this wretched virus that keeps us washing our hands, but much fear is simply irrational and unhelpful.

Julius Caesar was mortally afraid of thunder. Whenever he heard it, he had to get underground. Marshall Sachs, the famous soldier, victor at the battle of Fontenoy, screamed in terror and ran at the sight of a cat, and Peter the Great was unable to cross a bridge. And I've learned this week that there's a name for this fear, Gephyrophobia, based on the Greek words géfyra for bridge and phobos, which means fear, and it's not uncommon. The Mackinac bridge in Michigan offers a timid motorist program, which about a thousand people use a year and in this program you arrive at the bridge, you get out, you move around to the driver's seat, and one of the authorities gets in and drives your car over the bridge.

This current crisis is scary. We can't escape the fear, but we don't need to be overwhelmed of it, by it. We can make the decision to move over and let Jesus drive. We are not in this alone. "I will fear no evil," the psalmist says, "For you are with me."

Alan Emory was a man in the wool business, and he wanted to get a good round picture of every aspect of the business, so he spent one night out with the shepherd on the Texas prairie. And during the dark long night, the wail of coyotes pierced the air. The shepherd's dogs growled and looked into the darkness. The sheep, which had been sleeping, lumbered to their feet, alarmed and bleating pitifully. The shepherd tossed more logs on the fire and flames shot up. And in the glow, Mr. Emory looked out and saw thousands of little lights, and he realized that the lights were the reflections of the fire in the eyes of the sheep. In the midst of the danger, the sheep weren't looking out into the darkness. They turned towards the shepherd. They looked to the shepherd for safety. They knew that the shepherd would keep them safe.

Jesus is the good shepherd. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Him. These are very trying times, and it's significant for us as Christians that they're falling in the season of Lent. Who'd have thought when we were discussing on Ash Wednesday what we should give up for Lent, should it be chocolate or coffee, that we'd get to today, the middle Sunday of Lent, and we've given up going to bars and restaurants, going to the cinema, golf. We've given up going to school,

college, graduation. We've given up going out of the house.

Life has been stripped back and it's a stripping back that's always meant to be a part of Lent. And this is a Lent like no other. Fundamental questions are coming into view as everything is being stripped away. What do we fear? In whom or in what do we trust? Where is our hope? This is a time of testing. These are the experiences that shape us. How are we responding to this crisis? Let's have as part of our response a return to our formative texts, the texts which define us and shape who we are as Christians. In times of crisis, these texts are of most value.

In the coming week, Rebecca and I will try and offer reflections on various biblical passages to see how they continue to speak to us and speak to us afresh with new meanings in times of crisis. Psalm 23 is a famous Psalm because it has spoken to people of faith in times of crisis over centuries. Countless people have found comfort in these words. Let's look to join their number.