

During this time of health crisis it seems good, and hopefully comforting, to focus on some well-known sacred scriptures, and Psalm 23 surely is one heard often. Perhaps you have heard the cute story of a child learning this Psalm from her mother: The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want ... Yea though I walk through the valley... etc. Then the child says to her mother: I understand the part about God being with me, but who is Shirley Goodness, and why will she be following me all the days of my life?

Good, I noticed a few smiles; where would be without a little humor! There are many things to say about Psalm 23; Here are just a few. First of all “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” tells us that life is full of danger and disease and death. It tells us that people of faith are not exempt from sorrow and sickness. It tells us that God is not a Santa Claus God, as Rev. Holder of Unity wrote in the Saturday Daily News. There is no promise that if you are good all year you will receive nothing but presents and blessings.

No, a key phrase is “I fear no evil ... FOR THOU ART WITH ME.” God is depicted as a Spiritual Presence, Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. Using the next verses, we could say: I fear no evil, for GOODNESS AND KINDNESS are with me and will “follow me all the days of my life.” Now, this word “follow” is very interesting. Scholars say that it can also be translated as “pursue.” Surely goodness and kindness will “pursue” us all our lives. This means that goodness and kindness are all around us, available everywhere, all the time. Maybe you have heard in some Christian worship the call and response: “God Is Good..... All The Time!” (and we could add: “everywhere!”)

Krista Tippit underscores the ever-present reality of Goodness in her book *Becoming Wise: Our world is abundant with quiet, hidden lives of beauty and courage and goodness. There are millions of people at any given moment, young and old, giving themselves over to service, risking hope, and all the while ennobling us all. Taking in the good, whenever and wherever we find it, gives us new eyes for seeing*

and living. One place to look for goodness is in times past. I dare say that everyone has had some parent, grandparent, uncle, aunt, neighbor, teacher, or mentor who exuded goodness and kindness. Take a moment to reflect gratefully upon such people.

Joyce Rupp, in her book *Boundless Compassion*, passes along a story from England: *One commuter reported that every morning he noticed five tollbooths with short lines and a sixth one with a long line. He wondered about this, and learned that the long line was due to the person working in that particular toll booth. This worker took a personal interest in each driver that passed by. Without fail, he greeted everyone warmly asking how they and their families were doing. One recipient of his kindness was a driver who had lost his glasses. The compassionate toll booth worker noticed, and expressed empathy. Even the driver's own family had not been aware! Such was the effect of this kindness, that harassed drivers would line up, adding five or ten minutes to their commute, simply to be refreshed by this man's friendly words and authentic kindness!* No doubt, there is goodness and kindness all around, if we have open eyes and ears.

Thus, the first and obvious place to notice Divine goodness and kindness is people. And a second wonderful way to find it is in times and places of PRAYER. Well, that starts with people also: Do you remember your first experience of prayer? Perhaps bedtime prayers? Have you heard someone praying for you? In my college Christian fellowship, it was recommended that we all have a “small group,” or even one prayer partner. Scott Smith told me about his college “Oxford Group” at Cornell that also had this practice, finding one person with whom you could share about your life, be accountable to and pray for one another. Christianity has had a long history of small group “circles,” for discussion and for prayer.

At seminary, I was in a hospital chaplaincy group, in which two of us did find it helpful to meet once a week for sharing and prayer. To hear someone praying for you and vice versa is a very intimate expe-

rience of God’s goodness or “loving kindness.” Some of us have had the experience of a good therapist... someone who listens well, mirrors well, and is “in your corner.” A movement that started in the Catholic Church is called “Spiritual Direction,” a form of spiritual companioning which gives much comfort and encouragement. I have availed myself of this practice, which then allows me to be a better listener, mirror, and encourager in my prayers for others.

And yes, we can find Goodness and Kindness even in solitude. One of our elders often remarks that solitude is not the same as loneliness. Prayer and meditation can be the path to finding God as comforting presence, found in the deepest part of our hearts. Spiritual leader Henri Nouwen insists that places where we find peace and quiet for meditation, if visited regularly, will begin to call to us! We want to be in that place again, whether outdoors, or a favorite place in our home, because we so often experience the divine spirit of Goodness and Kindness there, sometimes even words of guidance (Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would bring to our remembrance the things he said, and lead us into all truth.)

I find that the idea of a Triune God, the “Trinity,” is a very helpful thought and image when we seek this God of goodness and kindness. If God can seem mostly like a “Mystery,” then looking to Jesus (often called the “face” of God) can be helpful. The gospel lesson this morning about Jesus sleeping in the back of the boat during a storm reminds me of that old spiritual: *“Put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea.... Put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee!”* We wonder about such miracle stories; any explanation from science or nature? We do know that squalls can arise and disappear quickly out in the bay. But analysis aside, Jesus was there, and calmed their fears. He continually calmed the anxieties of the disciples, saying “Be Not Afraid!” He exuded goodness, kindness, and CALMNESS. “Peace be with you” were often his next words!

Like a good shepherd, Jesus also said to the disciples: “I go before you, and will prepare a place for you, follow me.” We can note that Jesus brought his goodness and peace to his followers not only in the present, but as a promise for the future, echoing the Great Shepherd of Psalm 23... surely goodness and kindness will follow us ALL THE DAYS OF OUR LIVES, be with us and around us, even in the “valley of the shadow of death.”

One more thing: Be Not Afraid is not the same thing as having NO fear at all. Surely fear is a normal human emotion. But Jesus seemed to be saying, do not be paralyzed by fear. Take up your cross, face the storms of life, put on foul weather gear, put on a mask if need be, and through it all receive and spread the spirit of Goodness and Kindness all around us. I'll now sing, *Be Not Afraid*. It was written by Bob Dufford of the Jesuits in 1975. We sang it often in college, and it has since spread worldwide as a comfort for people of faith. It is based on Isaiah 43:2 and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:20):

1. *You shall cross the barren desert, but you shall not die of thirst. You shall wander far in safety though you do not know the way. You shall speak your words in foreign lands, and they will understand. You shall see the face of God and live.*

CHORUS: Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come follow me, and I will give you rest.

2. *If you pass through raging waters in the sea, you shall not drown. If you walk amid the burning flames, you shall not be harmed. If you stand before the power of hell and death is at your side, know that I am with you through it all.* CHORUS.

3. *Blessed are your poor, for the kingdom shall be theirs. Blessed are you that weep and mourn, for one day you shall laugh. And if wicked tongues insult or hate you all because of me, blessed, blessed are you!* CHORUS