

Message for Mar. 22

The Lord Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23

O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

As we look at the closings of schools, cancellations of sporting events, celebrations being rescheduled and even churches closing, we have to look at “what is at the heart of these unprecedented drastic measures that have been taken?” What is it that we are trying to stop?

What is it that we are afraid might happen? What is it that has so many people worrying? Is there really an unseen enemy out there that we can't control that is out to get us?

As we are faced with a situation that has bloomed into a crisis, every one of us is confronted with several issues: What do we want our leaders to protect us from? What will happen if they fail? What are we willing to do or become if this thing continues? What freedoms will we give up?

One thing for sure, we must appear to God like sheep scattered on a hill trying figure out which direction to run. Thanks to the spread of information and disinformation on social media some sheep are terrified, and their own fear will kill them.

When you peel back the layers of our anxiety, what is at the heart of it all? We are worrying about the possibility of dying. Fear of our own death or fear of the death of those that we love is a genuine concern. Yet as believers, we have the antidote to the fear of death. His name is Jesus Christ.

Can we really trust what Jesus tells us about death? I think we ought to at least consider his opinion in that we know he died, and we know he rose again from the dead because over 500 eyewitnesses saw him at one time.

Jesus died on a cross, and he rose from the dead because he knew each one of us was going to die because of our wrongdoing and the evil in our hearts. He knew that we would be afraid of death because inside we know that we have done wrong, and that somehow, we are going to give an account for what we have done.

Today, more and more people are being troubled because they are forced to face, “I could get this coronavirus and not even know it.” They convince themselves they will be among the small percentage of people who die.

How should believers respond to any crisis in which the fear of death is out there? It begins with knowing our hope is always to be rooted in God. Our most well-known verse in the Bible, is where we begin. Psalm 23 tells us. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

I want you to know, that God says, we are his sheep and the sheep of his pasture. God knew about the coronavirus 10 years ago and even one thousand years ago. God knew about our days before a single one of them came into being. Nothing has ever caught God by surprise.

This is not the first virus or plague to enter the world. Have you ever considered the possibility that God wants to use the church to show the world who He is by how we react to the coronavirus? Are we willing to talk with others about what the fear is with the virus? Are we willing to bring up the topic of death and what's there afterwards?

If the Lord is truly our shepherd, as believers, are we to be afraid or to worry about what the coronavirus might do to us? Do we believe that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to His purposes? We never know where our faith is rooted until we run into a crisis.

Past rampant plagues and diseases have been opportunities for Christians to shine in society. At the height of the plague, known as the Plague of Cyprian, St. Cyprian chronicled that 5000 people every day died in just the city of Rome itself. That's not including the rest of the empire. During the plague many Christians died as well as many pagans, but the amazing thing about this crisis

was the witness of the Christians of the love of Jesus Christ to their pagan neighbors. Whereas many people abandoned those who got sick, the Christians risked their lives to take care of those who had been abandoned by their families. The leaders and people, including the doctors, began to abandon the cities, leaving the sick behind to die. The Christians stayed in the cities to take care of those who were ill.

Candida Moss, a professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Notre Dame notes, "An epidemic that seemed like the end of the world actually promoted the spread of Christianity." By their action in the face of death, Christians showed their pagan neighbors that Christianity is worth dying for.

Do we believe Jesus when Jesus tells us that he is the good shepherd? We like to believe that means that Jesus is always going to surround us with good things that will make us comfortable in life. He's going to lead us to cause us to lie down in green pastures where there is plenty of food for us to eat and be happy.

But then we choose to forget that's not the only place Jesus leads us, and that's not the only role Jesus has for us. What is this talk about walking through the valley of the shadow of death or walking through the darkest valley?

There are all kinds of valleys the shepherd leads us down. The valley of sickness, the valley of loneliness, the valley of pain and suffering, the valley of broken dreams or unfulfilled promises, the valley of unemployment and homelessness, the valley of the loss of a skill or talent, and the valley of the death of someone we love. Those are valleys we have no control over and yet the events of life seem to slide us into them whether we are willing to go or not.

Let's just suppose for a moment that this coronavirus is being used by God to create a harvest of hearts that are open because of fear, anxiety, and worry. Beyond the virus itself, people are going to worry about how they are going to pay their bills with their jobs being shut down and who will watch over their kids while they work.

How many of us are willing to be a lamb sent out among wolves for Jesus in this crisis? I do know that Jesus knew, if he sent out lambs among the wolves, some of those lambs are not going to make it back.

What was it the Christians had during the plagues in Europe that caused them to head toward the sick and dying to help them, when everyone else was running away from them trying to save their own lives? Could it be they loved Jesus more than they loved their own lives? Could it be they believed the promises of Jesus even in the face of

death itself. Were they trying to love their neighbor as themselves?

Did they understand their witness might be the final thing separating this person who was ill from entering eternity hopelessly lost, dying in their sins with no chance of a Savior to stand beside them at the great judgment. Whatever it was, I want it for my own life. I want it for the people of this church. I want it for today's body of Christ. We have a hope promised to us that goes beyond the concerns of this world.

The psalmist did not stay in the valley of the shadow of death. He went on to write, "I will fear no evil, for you are with me." It's good to use all the hand sanitizer you can, but that's not where your deliverance is. Your deliverance is in the fact that God is with you.

The psalmist says God's rod and staff they comfort him. God's rod and staff comes in many different forms.

The Apostle Paul once wrote, "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." Is that where we are in our hearts today? Do we really believe that Jesus is going to be there for us? I know some of us say, but I've got others depending on me so I can't just die. It is an illusion to think we can determine how long or short on earth our time is going to be.

How does God expect to use us in response to the worry and fear that has spread through our nation and the

world? Will we see this as an opportunity to reach out and serve those who are affected by this situation directly or indirectly? Will we show a confidence in Christ for our future that the world has not known by not joining in the panic?

Will we become bolder in our witness of God actually being in charge of our lives? Will we be willing to continue to embrace those who are being cast aside? It won't be long before we start to look at people a certain way and decide that person probably has it and so I'm going to keep a little bit more distance.

Even if we think the coronavirus is a great enemy, the psalmist concludes in Psalm 23:5-6 (NIV) 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

We should be able to celebrate what God has done for us even with the coronavirus around us. They can say what they want to say about the coronavirus, I still believe God is sitting on throne of heaven and God's plans and purposes will still be accomplished.

Blessed be God, day by day. Amen.

(Some of the historical data quota is from Eric Metaxes in a Breakpoint Article "Running Toward the Plague: Christians And Ebola.")