

The longer I sat in the store parking lot, the more anxious I became. I didn't actually go into the store. I haven't been inside a store for the better part of a month. Keith and I are trying to take this "social distancing" thing seriously, so we've been avoiding crowds and staying home. Besides, between grocery delivery, curbside pickup, and the omnipresent reality that is Amazon Prime, there hasn't really been a need to enter a brick-and-mortar store.

I didn't go into the store. I sat in the store parking lot, in Target's designated "contactless drive-up pick-up" parking space. I waited for the store attendant to bring my order to my car. And as I waited, I counted. Number of people going in. Number of people coming out. Number of people wearing masks. This was right around the time when the CDC was just starting to recommend we wear masks when going out to do "essential" tasks, and more than half of the shoppers in the parking lot that day were following those recommendations. More than half of the shoppers were wearing masks. I'll admit: the more masks I saw, the more anxious I felt.

It's not like I have some kind of "mask phobia" or anything. I worked as a hospital chaplain for the better part of a year. I've seen my share of hospital masks, worn my share of hospital masks. But there was something about seeing all those masks on all those shoppers that just filled me with anxiety. With fear. With dread. I couldn't even put my finger on why. I just wanted to get out of that parking lot as soon as I could.

Something tells me I'm going to have to get used to that sight. Something tells me that masks may well be a part of our new normal, at least for now (however long "for now" might be). Something tells me I have to find a way to make peace with the sight of all those masks. Maybe... maybe our scripture for today can help me do that.

We're starting a new sermon series today, one that I like to call "Sermons from a Brown Bag." It's a tradition for me, one I've been keeping during the season of Easter

for at least the past seven or eight years. Each year, I invite church members to choose some ordinary, everyday item, pack it in a brown paper bag, and bring it to church -- offering it as inspiration for the next week's sermon.

Over the years, I've preached on some strange items. A sock darter. A paintbrush. A remote control. An egg separator. A canister of freeze-dried turtle food. A candy necklace. One of those industrial-strength insulators you'd find on an electric pole. A mug with Farrah Fawcett's face on it. A Christmas flamingo lawn decoration that wouldn't light. And in each item -- somehow, some way -- we found a glimpse of the gospel.

Why do I do this? For starters, it's a lot of fun. But why do I do this during the season of Easter? Simply put: I believe Easter changes everything. I believe the resurrection changes *everything*. Sin loses its power, and death loses its grip, and everything is different, everything is new. And because of that, everything around us -- even the junk in the junk drawer and the stuff piling up in the basement -- has the capacity to convey some of this good resurrection news. The resurrection changes everything, touches everything. Over these past several years, I have yet to find an item that wouldn't preach.

Pastor Debbie was kind enough to bring in our first "brown bag" item for this series: a collapsible trivet. (She had to tell me that. When I first pulled it out of the bag, I had no idea what I was looking at. But then, I'm not much of a cook.) You probably have a trivet at home (maybe not a collapsible silicone trivet, but some kind of trivet). A trivet (according to the open-source fount of knowledge that is Wikipedia) is "is an object placed between a serving dish or bowl, and a dining table, usually to protect the table from heat damage."<sup>1</sup> It's a lot like a potholder, really. To keep your table from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trivet>

being scorched, you place a trivet under a hot pan, pot, or serving dish. Think of it as PPE for your dining table.

A trivet like this has one main purpose: to protect. It provides a protective barrier between your table and the thing that threatens to damage your table. That's what it's used for. That's what it's there for. To protect.

That's a word we've been hearing a lot lately. It's in the ether. It's in the news. In this strange season of coronavirus, "protection" is at the forefront of our minds. How to protect ourselves. How to protect our loved ones. How to protect those who are working in grocery stores and delivery services. How to protect those who are working on the front lines in health care. How to access personal protective equipment. How to make your own protective face mask. Protect, protect, protect.

So as I looked at this protective little trivet (which is super-fun to play with, by the way... it's almost like a fidget spinner), I began thinking of those scriptures that talk about protection, God's protection. There are a lot of them. I had no shortage of scriptures to choose from. But I kept returning, again and again, to a familiar scripture... one you've no doubt heard dozens of times... the familiar words of Psalm 23:

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.

You've heard that one before, right? Probably at a funeral? Lord knows I've read it at enough funerals. And that alone may make you wonder: *Pastor... is this really the right time to be reading Psalm 23? I mean, with everything going on? Do you really want to make everyone start thinking about... death?* Well, for starters, let's tell it like it is: we get daily updates from state, federal, and global health officials on the death tolls and mortality rates of coronavirus. We're already thinking about death. The scripture I choose for a particular Sunday morning is not going to change that.

What's more... I'm not convinced this scripture is really about death. Oh, I get why we read it at funerals. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," right? (Psalm 23:4, KJV). That's how the traditional wording goes. It seems tailor-made for funerals. And there's that bit at the end... "I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever" (Psalm 23:6, KJV). Some good death-and-eternal-life language there. Seems fitting for a funeral. That's why I read it at funerals.

So it's natural for us to take a funeral scripture and associate it with death... but really, I think this scripture speaks more about daily life than it does about death. The opening verses focus on what is needed to sustain life. Biblical commentator J. Clinton McCann Jr. writes:

For a sheep, to be able to "lie down in green pastures" means to have food; to be led "beside still waters" means to have something to drink; to be led "in right paths" means that danger is avoided and proper shelter is

attained. In short, God “restores my soul,” or, better translated, God “keeps me alive.”<sup>2</sup>

*Keeps me alive.* This psalm is about life, not death.

And this psalm isn't just about sustaining life; it's about protecting life, too. In verse four, we find this psalm at its most protective. (That's what we're talking about today, right? Inspired by this protective little trivet?) In verse four, the language gently turns from sustaining life to protecting it. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff -- they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4, NRSV). Here in verse four, the psalmist speaks to God's presence, God's protection, even in the midst of the darkest valley... the valley of the shadow of death.

And there, right there, that's when I realized... that's when I realized why the sight of all those masks in the Target parking lot filled me with such anxiety, such fear, such dread. It wasn't the masks. It was what the masks represented. Every mask -- every single mask -- was an additional reminder that we're now finding ourselves in that darkest valley, under the shadow of coronavirus, in that “valley of the shadow of death.”

Friends, I'm going to level with you: I don't want to be in the valley of the shadow of death. I'm tired of the valley of the shadow of death. I'm worried and scared in the valley of the shadow of death, and I just want the valley of the shadow of death to go away. But instead, those masks fill my sight like a blinking hazard sign that reads: “Welcome to the valley of the shadow of death.” Sometimes, I just want to bury my face in my hands and block out any reminder of the valley of the shadow of death -- masks included.

But that's not an option. Not at home, and not in the Target parking lot, and certainly not here in God's house. So I read again: “Even though I walk through the

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<sup>2</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreters Bible*, vol. 4, ed. by Leander E. Keck et al (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 767.

darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff -- they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4, NRSV). *They comfort me*, the psalmist writes. The mental image of the shepherd’s tools of protection -- a rod and a staff -- provide the psalmist with comfort. Not anxiety. Not fear. Not dread. Comfort.

Let’s be clear: sheep have some very real things to fear in this valley of the shadow of death. There are predators. There are pitfalls. That’s why the shepherd is armed to the teeth in the first place, with a rod to defend the sheep from some dangers and a staff to pull them back from others. There are some very real things to fear in the valley of the shadow of death. Yet the psalmist isn’t focusing on that. When the psalmist imagines those tools of protection (that rod and that staff), they serve not as foreboding reminders of the dangers that render him in need of protection, but rather as comforting reminders of the One offering that protection.

*Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*

Maybe those words can transform how I perceive the masks that I see all around me. Maybe I can see something other than anxiety, fear, or dread in them. Maybe I can see comfort. Up until now, when I’ve glimpsed these tools of protection -- gloves and masks and the like -- intruding on the spaces where I’m not used to encountering them, all I can focus on is the virus they’re meant to protect against, and on all that this virus has taken from us, and on all that this virus threatens to take from us. All I can focus on is the threat... so of course anxiety, fear, and dread are close behind.

But perhaps this psalm can shift my focus. If the psalmist can see “tools of protection” not as foreboding reminders of danger, but rather as comforting reminders of protection from danger... why can’t I?

As I say that, I’m mindful of something I heard in one of the press conferences held by Dr. Rachel Levine, Pennsylvania’s Secretary of Health. In focusing on the basic

function of these protective masks, she said: *Remember: my mask protects you, and your mask protects me.* As I see all those faces covered by masks... perhaps I can allow them to remind me of this very basic fact: other human beings, neighbors and strangers alike, are taking this measure not so much to protect themselves, but to protect me. How could I not be comforted by that? We're not in this alone; we're in this together. We're considering the needs of one another, showing care and concern for one another, protecting one another. That thought alone, that reminder, can refocus me... inspire me... comfort me.

And then... perhaps, by grace, that refocus can open the door for another. As I see all those faces covered by masks... perhaps I can allow them to remind me of the One whose protection we seek above all. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; *for you are with me*; your rod and your staff—they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4, NRSV, emphasis mine). *For you are with me.* As I read those words, I'm comforted... because the shepherd who is there to sustain and protect the psalmist in that dark valley is the same Shepherd who is there to sustain and protect me in this one.

And of course, that protection isn't a substitute for the simple steps we should all take to protect ourselves from this virus. We may be "covered by the blood of Jesus," but that's not the same as being immune to corona. So we should still wash our hands and avoid large groups and wear masks when we go out to protect ourselves and others in this pandemic, just like we wear seat belts to protect ourselves when we're out on the road. God gives us wisdom as well as faith, right?

In this season of coronavirus, I think this psalm, with all of its words of presence and providence and protection, offers a choice. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; *for you are with me*; your rod and your staff—they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4, NRSV). That rod and that staff... they can be foreboding reminders

of just how dangerous this dark valley is. (That's why the shepherd is armed with a rod and staff in the first place, right? Because it's scary out there.) So yes, these protective tools can be foreboding reminders of dangers out there... or they can be comforting reminders of the shepherd who's there in that dark valley, too. These masks, all around us... they can be foreboding reminders of just how dangerous this dark valley is, too. (That's why we're equipping ourselves with masks and hand sanitizers, right? Because it's a little scary out there.) So yes, these protective tools can be foreboding reminders of the dangers out there... or, if we let them, they can be comforting reminders of the ways we're caring for each other, the ways we're protecting each other, and the ways that God's protective presence is with us in the midst of it all.

In this season of coronavirus, in the face of so many things meant to protect us, this psalm offers us a choice... a choice of where to fix our focus... to fix it on fear, or to fix it on comfort. The psalm offers us a choice, and I think -- by grace -- I'm going with the psalmist on this one: "your rod and your staff—they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4, NRSV).