

“A Surreal Time”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent IV – March 22, 2020

Psalm 23

I don't really know a better word to use to describe what we are all going through than surreal. It doesn't seem real to be self-isolating ourselves at home. It doesn't feel right for children and teachers to not be at school, now at least through May 1, without snow or ice on the ground. It doesn't make sense that we have to close many of the places where we gather together – including the church building – and for the foreseeable future, and instead interact with one another through phone calls, text, emails, and videos online. It all seems surreal.

Amy Willis, our church secretary, stated it well this week: It's a lot of new in a very short amount of time. Throughout this Covid-19 health crisis, each time I felt like I was getting adjusted to our new normal, the normal changed drastically – often multiple times within one day. So much new, so much change, in such a short amount of time. As many of you shared last week, it's exhausting, unnerving, and disorienting all at once. And as my daughter, Heather, commented this week, what's hardest is there is no end date. At least with a winter storm, we can see a forecast and know when the snow and ice will stop or melt. With this, there is no way of knowing when we'll be able to come out of the deep-freeze we're living in.

We all have personal stories to share. We're telling them to one another on the phone. We're posting pictures and stories on social media. We're sending emails or writing letters to family and friends. And I believe that is something we need to keep doing with one another so that we continue to be reminded that we are not alone in the midst of this surreal time. God is present with us – in our conversations and communications, in our times of hope and times of worry, in our moments of strength, and most definitely in our times of weakness.

If you'll permit me, I wish to share with you our family's story over the past several days. I've received permission from the pertinent players in this narrative to do this! Perhaps as I recount our experiences, you will also hear not only where God was present for us, but also where God has been and will continue to be present with you in this surreal time.

Like many of you, we were somewhat overwhelmed by the speed of changes that were taking place in our country. Our youngest daughter, Heather, is a senior at Pike High School, and like all of our local schoolchildren, her last day to be physically at school was March 12. Since then, she's been at home doing remote learning. I cannot image how those of you with younger children are managing this, by the way. My prayers are with all of you in this trying time.

Our older daughter, Erin, is a sophomore at Davidson College in North Carolina. Her spring break was the first week of March, and for that week, she went on a pilgrimage trip to Taizé, France, with other students and staff from the Chaplain's Office at the college. It was a powerful experience for Erin and many of her friends, as they met young adults from across the world in this unique Christian community in the foothills of the French Alps.

Erin returned to the United States on Sunday, March 8, which by the way was the last Sunday we worshipped together in-person here at the church. In the couple of days after she got back, she had a cough and some congestion, which she attributed to the trip and jet lag. By Wednesday, March 11, when things had really started to ramp up in the country about the virus and social distancing measures were put in place, she went to the college health services to be evaluated. She wondered, since she had been out of the country and interacted with people from Europe, could she have the coronavirus? The college doctors and nurses did not feel that was the case, since she had not had a fever. So, she went back to her routine of that week.

On Thursday, March 12, the college made the decision which so many other universities and colleges have been forced to make – that is, to close their residence halls and move to remote learning for the rest of the semester. This has been a devastating blow to so many students across the country, especially those who are seniors and would be graduating this spring. Davidson asked that all students who are able to leave to do so by March 17, with remote learning to begin the following day.

So, Debbie and I started looking at our calendars and figuring out how we could make this work. I am grateful to the staff, the Personnel Team and the Session for being flexible with my time so that I could be gone earlier this week to pick Erin up. All of that said – Thursday night we decided we would leave Sunday after church, stay with my mom in West Virginia Sunday night, get to Davidson Monday around noon, get her packed up by that evening, and then drive back home on Tuesday. That would also give her the weekend to spend time with her friends, saying goodbye, and getting her stuff organized and packed.

Friday morning, things changed again. Erin still did not feel great, and she went back to the college health center. She wasn't sure if she had had a low-grade fever or not, and she just needed the peace-of-mind to know one way or the other. The doctors there still didn't think she had Covid-19, but they consulted with the North Carolina Department of Health. Because she had travelled to Europe within the last ten days, and had the interactions she did, the department of health suggested that she be tested for the virus. She was tested at the health center, a test that would take between three and four days to get results.

But the other major implication of that decision was that the college had procedures in place that if any student was being tested for the virus, he or she had to be in quarantine. So, starting on Friday afternoon, Erin was in isolated quarantine at the guest house on campus. She could not have any in-person visitors. She had to stay in her room at all times. They brought her some personal items and change of clothes, and of course meals every day. But she was stuck in a bedroom for three-and-a-half days.

Erin was okay with us sticking to our original schedule for getting her, even though we offered to push that up if it would be helpful to her. For us, it was agonizing to live in this unknown time – being separated from her, not knowing if she was infected or not, how this would impact us upon returning to Indianapolis. The health department told her that she did not have to remain in North Carolina to wait for her test results. Nor did she have to return to the state if she tested

positive. She would just have to take precautions while travelling to protect others, and then be under care of a physician here if that was necessary.

Debbie and I did not want to tell others about this until we knew what Erin's test results would be. We told our mothers and Debbie's brother. I told the people here with me today – Lisa, Jon, and Jeff. Debbie told a couple of colleagues at the hospital, so they were prepared. You see – if Erin tested positive, Debbie and I would have to be under a two-week self-quarantine ourselves. Both of us needed to be sure our co-workers were aware of that, and we are grateful for their support. Because our first priority – as I'm sure all of yours would have been – was to get our family back together safe under one roof.

Debbie and I arrived in Davidson around noon on Monday, and we were met by one of the associate deans of the college, who was incredibly helpful to Erin and us during this stressful time. With the benefit of video chats and phone calls to connect us with Erin, we began packing up her stuff in her dorm room. And I am proud to say, that in five hours, we had all of her stuff packed, stored, and loaded in the van. As Debbie said, when you don't have emotional attachment to the stuff, it's much easier to get everything put away! Plus, as we told Erin, it would be a fun experience over the next two months here at home for her to "find" everything that we packed up!

On Tuesday morning, we all got in the van to drive back to Indy. And we waited and waited and waited to get word about her coronavirus test. I will confess that it was a nervous ride while we waited. Was it just a cold and we would be able to do whatever we needed to do when we got home? Was it the Covid-19 virus, and thus, all four of us would be isolated at home for fourteen days? Such a surreal time.

About halfway home, actually when we were entering my hometown of Charleston, West Virginia, Erin got an email from the health center that her test came back negative for the coronavirus. She was clear. And we hooted and hollered and let our family and others know the news. It was a relief, to be sure. But it also has led me to reflect on a few things in the midst of what we are living through as a human race right now.

First, we must take this seriously. I am proud of Erin to have made the choice she made to be tested and do the right thing. All of us need to recognize this is not hype or sensationalism – this is real and is very serious. The motivation for these drastic social distancing measures is to prevent our health care system from being overwhelmed. And we are not far away from that happening in many parts of the country. God has given us the brains and reason to make informed decisions about how to care for ourselves and one another. We need to act in ways that keep us and our neighbors well – stay home, limit physical contact, wash our hands. Repeat over and over and over again.

Second, we must continue to be connected and care for one another, even when we cannot be physically together. God was present for us in many ways: in the kindness of friends who let us stay overnight in Davidson and stored Erin's things on short notice; in her roommate and her boyfriend, who constantly checked on her; in supportive texts and messages from family and friends to all of us. We would not have made it through this turbulent week if it had not been for those moments of grace. We can and must do that for others as disciples of Jesus Christ

in this difficult time. We have witnessed that from many of you this past week – well done! Don't stop! Keep doing it! And know that every time you do, you are helping others feel less fearful, more hopeful, and closer to God's love.

Third, this crisis will come to an end. With everyone doing their part, hopefully it will end sooner rather than later. And when it does, we will need space and time to reflect on how we have changed and what we have learned. Those will be moments that I pray we can listen for the Spirit's voice and consider how we are to be disciples moving forward. Will we take it for granted when we are back to our normal routines? Or will we treasure what we have been given and with gratitude live lives that show others our deep reliance on God's providence and grace?

It was back in January that I chose the scripture for today – Psalm 23. Never in a million years could I have predicted then the circumstances we would be living under today. But sometimes, God has a funny way of working like that. Because what brings me great comfort as I read this familiar psalm today in our present context is the fact that God is the one who is acting, God is the one who is the guiding force in our lives. And God will not abandon us – no matter the circumstance or season.

Let me close by reading the psalm again. And as I do, consider how these familiar words provide a fresh and clear reminder to us today, that even in surreal times like these, God is with us – now and always.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
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.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
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.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.