

O God of Goodness and Mercy, help us to be bold in our loving, brave in facing down our terrors, and graceful in our lives becoming songs of praise ever sung to you. Amen.

There are 2 large stone lions that guard the entrance to the public library on 42nd Street in New York City.

They were placed there in 1911 and were given various nicknames, but in the 1930's, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, officially named them Patience and Fortitude, for the qualities he thought New Yorkers would need to get through the Great Depression.

They are impressive, with long curling manes, wonderful big soft paws

and they preside over one of the most fantastic reading rooms in the world, well worth a visit.

I'm never sure if they were designed to welcome or to intimidate.

looking up and off regally as if we humans are made of such weak stuff that they don't even need to acknowledge us as we climb the steps to the library. Patience and Fortitude.

Qualities that made a huge difference during the Depression and qualities that we need so badly today.

Patience to get through the limitations imposed by the quarantine and fortitude to deal with the emotional and economic costs of this pandemic

The lions remind me of an image in the 23rd Psalm that we heard this morning.

What is it about the 23rd psalm that makes it the most well known, the one many of us can actually recite from memory?

What is it about it that makes it the most requested psalm at funerals?

Maybe it's that first verse – "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want."

We may hear ranchers or shepherd talk about what it is like to take care of their livestock

but how often do we hear the animals themselves speak up.

Because it's a sheep that has the opening line in this psalm.

That guy over there. He's my shepherd. He's the one I follow.

Along the lines of that often-quoted verse from Joshua (24:15),

"But as for me and my house, we will follow the Lord."

Other ways to say it might be, I'm not certain about anything right now, but the Lord is my shepherd.

Or I have lost my job, but I will not lack.

Or I am terrified of getting sick right now,

but my very being will be restored.

When we choose to follow someone or something we have a purpose.

We've chosen a direction and that's where we're headed.

There is great comfort in being clear about our goal, our priority,
the thing that is most important to us.

This psalm speaks of the presence of God –
the presence of God as blessing.

But not the presence of God as rescue.

When Jesus called us to follow him, he didn't promise that we would be safe.

He promised us life.

He didn't promise us a life free from pain.

He promised us freedom from fear.

Freedom from fear. And we know a lot more about fear than we did 2 months ago.

Look at Jesus' own life.

He could have chosen the way of self-protection.

He could have allowed the fear of the authorities,
fear of punishment, fear of torture, fear of death to control his life.

He could have gone underground or toned down his message
to make it more palatable.

But he chose to testify to the way of life and love no matter what the cost might be.

He didn't hide in fear. He proclaimed in public.

And by choosing that way, he offered us
not just the promise of his death and resurrection
but he offered us our own way of life too.

He healed people but then he sent them out
to live the new fuller life he offered them.

He expected them to celebrate their healing
and then to do something with their new sight or ability to walk.

We can choose to live in fear or we can choose to live in freedom and trust.

There is so much to be scared of – sickness, death, isolation, loss of income.

It feels like a blizzard of the ills that Pandora released when she opened her box.

But the presence of God is walking beside us.

What is so powerful and reassuring about this psalm
is the weight of God's presence.

The author is saying, the author is really testifying to the fact
that God is there in every minute of his life –

not as some supernatural force but as everyday things like food and water.

In the beginning, the author presents himself as a sheep,
satisfied with simple things like pasture and water.

But God's presence means that we don't just have food and drink
but he also feeds our hearts and our souls.
And even when our lives seem to be surrounded by utter darkness,
God is walking along side of us.
He's ready with his rod to chase away everything from evil to wild animals
and he's ready with his staff to lead the way.
And when the darkness lifts or we reach the end of a dangerous or scary path,
he's ready to celebrate with us.
"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."
I think the fact that this meal, this celebration,
happens in the presence of our enemies is an acknowledgement that life is always,
even in times of celebration, a mixture of good and bad things.
Or maybe it's a challenge to us to see if we can find places
where we can come together with our enemies.
But even if our enemies are crowding around the table,
shoving us out of the way so they can get the best juiciest apples
and the tastiest cheese, there is more than enough for everyone,
enough so that our cups can't contain all that God is showering upon us.
This banquet could be the Eucharist, where we come to restore our souls
and our relationships with God and each other.

Another way to see this psalm is as a brief outline
of the story that lies behind most stories – life as journey or pilgrimage –
the ancient and universal story for every age and time.
We begin on the sunny banks of a river, flowing by lush, green pastures.
Life is good. Life is easy.
We have declared the intention of our journey, our destination.
We are seeking God.
Then life gets complicated, messy, dark.
We are on paths we never thought we'd be on,
in the middle of places we never thought we'd be,
It gets hard – really hard.
Often we don't even know where we are going.
And everything and everyone that we trusted in is no longer trustworthy.
They have proved themselves to be inadequate for the journey.
The only thing we know for sure is that God is with us,
maybe very remote but out there somewhere.
And then at some point, the darkness lifts,
the valley of the shadow of death comes to an end,
and we can see the banquet table that may have been there all the time.

We bring all of what we have been through to the table,
no longer innocents, but weary and grateful travelers
who can now appreciate more than ever what it means
to be able to sit down in peace, to eat a good meal, to enjoy good company.
Maybe this pattern happens only once in our lives.
Maybe it happens over and over again.
But throughout the light and the darkness, God is there. God is there.

All of us wish we could come to the table this morning,
in the midst of this community,
this table set by God
where we get food for our journeys.
It is a place where God's presence gives us both comfort and encouragement.
It is a place of respite and expectation.

You may be wondering why those 2 lions reminded me of the 23rd psalm.
It's because of that last line in the psalm –
Surely Goodness and Mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.
Goodness and Mercy.
I have come to think of them as Jesus's sheepdogs.
They are Australian sheepdogs with black and white coats
and maybe those distinctive eyes, one blue and one brown.
They have endless energy and can manage any size flock.
They are alert, ready, clear about what their role is.
And their job, at least the job of Jesus' sheepdogs, Goodness and Mercy,
is to follow us all the days of our lives.
And the verb in Hebrew is not some sort of passive following.
The sheepdog Goodness will chase us.
His partner Mercy will pursue us.
They will not let us out of their sight.
And I think about the contrast between the cold, majestic lions,
unmoving in their stony glory
and those sheepdogs, racing around, panting, maybe covered in mud and burrs,
full of life and purpose and I choose sheepdogs over lions any day.
Jesus' sheepdogs, Goodness and Mercy are always there,
maybe just out of sight,
maybe giving us a nudge with a wet nose,
maybe barking at us when we stop paying attention or lose our way.
But guiding us, always guiding and encouraging us, into the way of life and love.
Amen.

