

March 22, 2020: 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent; Church@Home (<http://facebook.com/firstchurchriverside/>)  
Sermon by the Rev. J. T. Kim (First United Methodist Church of Riverside)

# WALKING THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

(Psalm 23, NKJV)

## *The Lord Is My Shepherd*

The Lord *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.

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

<sup>3</sup>He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will 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 runs over.

<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

(John 16:32-33, NIV)

<sup>32</sup>"A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

<sup>33</sup>"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

## WELCOME!



Welcome to Church@Home: Sunday Worship Livestreaming!

Hi, Everyone! Thank you so much for joining us Sunday Worship online.

Even though Livestreaming Service is not a perfect way of worship, we are exploring a new way of worshipping God and fellowshiping with one another. Even though we are physically isolated in our homes, yet, we can be united in one Spirit as we come together to worship God.

Please join me in this Prayer of Illumination:

Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

My friends in Christ:



We are now living in very weird, anxious, and unprecedented times because our normal lives are completely disrupted due to the ongoing Coronavirus Pandemic.

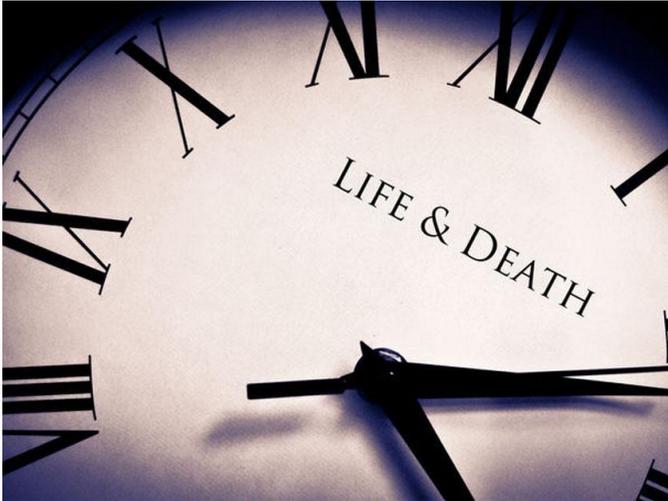
We are trying to adapt ourselves to the new reality, even though it's temporary, in order to sustain our lives.

In my entire pastoral ministry years, I NEVER called or emailed any church members to urge them NOT to come to Sunday Worship before. It just seems surreal!



As of yesterday, I heard from the news that in Italy, nearly 800 people died in just one day -- yesterday alone. That means about 33 people died every hour; 1 person died every two minutes. It's just one of many scary examples.

The entire humanity is at war. We are fighting against the enemy that we cannot see. At this time, NO vaccine or antiviral treatment for the COVID-19 would be available until 12 or 18 months, according to the health authorities.



Yes, we are living in a seriously frightening time of life and death. No wonder "6-foot Social Distancing" is being enforced because we need to "Stop the Spread" the virus.

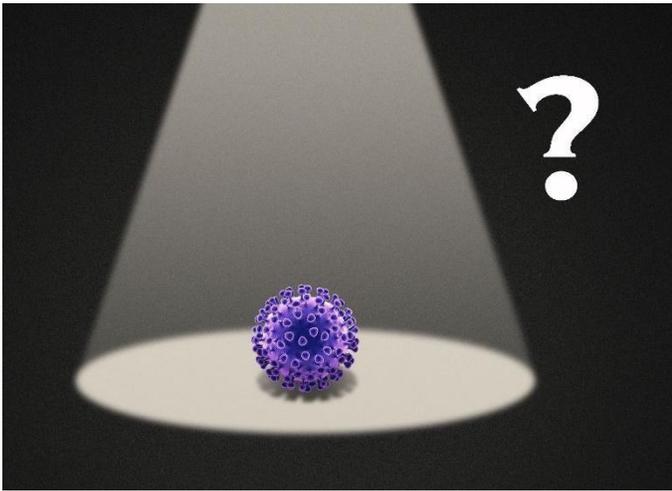


Pretty much everything and everywhere is on a lockdown .

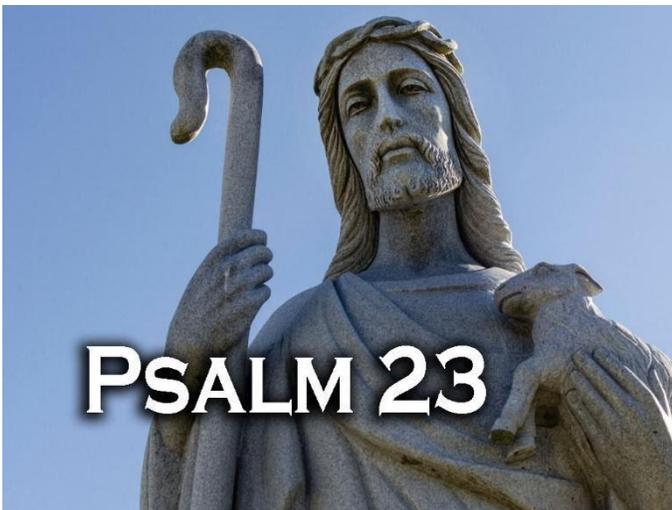
No more touching or handshaking. No hugging. This new "social distancing" reminds me of Ecclesiastes from the Old Testament 3:1, **"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:"**

Then the whole list follows. Interestingly, v. 5, according to ICB (International Children's Bible), it says: **"There is a time to hug and a time not to hug."**

Now, we are ordered to be "isolated." We are to "confine" ourselves in the home.



The scariest part would be that we don't know how long we must endure this time.



This morning, I'd like to share with you Psalm 23 as a message of comfort, courage, and strength – amid isolation, fears, and anxieties. Even though we are living disrupted, unusual, and even unpredictable days, we can be stronger than ever.

Psalm 23 is one of the most famous Bible passages known to God's people, especially Jews and Christians and many others, and even to non-believers. At every funeral, memorial, or celebration of life service, this Psalm 23 is read, and people can find peace and comfort. Remember, this Psalm 23 is not for the deceased, but for the people who are still sustaining, yet grieving.

Somehow, I love reading this Psalm 23 in the New King James Version. Thanks to Sarah the Liturgist for reading this Psalm 23 beautifully.

Please join me in reading the first 3 verses together and carefully.

**The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.**

**<sup>2</sup>He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.**

**<sup>3</sup>He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.**

Now please pay attention to the v. 4

**4Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**

Have you noticed that the pronouns from the first 3 verses now have been changed in v. 4 from “He” to “You?” I believe this is a very important transition, especially when we are facing times of doubt, trouble, and even death.

Unlike the first three verses that show God’s provision of peaceful “**green pastures**” and “**still waters**,” in good times, the Psalmist David assures his total trust in God even when walking “**through the valley of the shadow of death.**”

God is not someone who is far away!

God is not some kind of magician who gives you all kinds of amazing things!

God is not a vending-machine who gives you all the expected answers for your prayer “coin”!

God is not a God who dwells only in the sanctuary.

God is not just someone else’s nice God.

God is YOUR God!

God is with you right now -

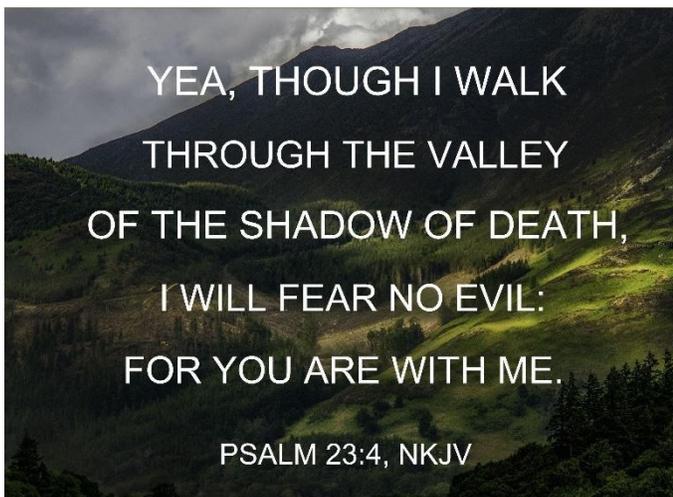
God is with you at your home now!

God examines your heart!

God listens to your prayers!

God comforts you and strengthens you no matter what!

God loves you so much that He gave you Christ Jesus!

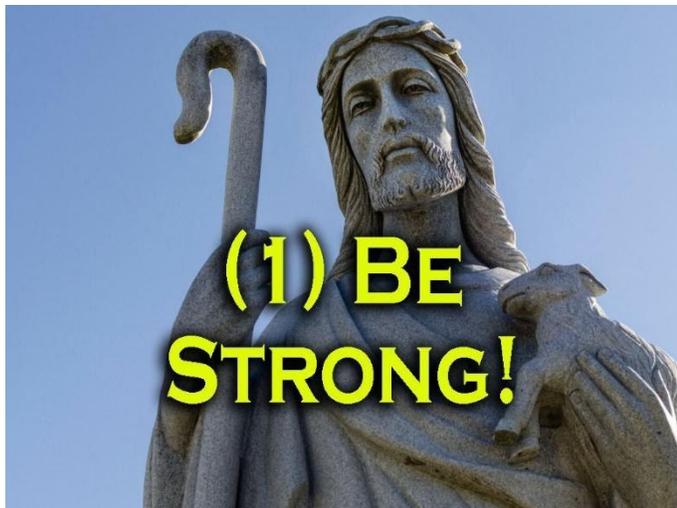


God is closer to you when you are walking “**through the valley of the shadow of death**” in your life than ever.

Why? David, the Psalmist, boldly sings **“I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me.”**

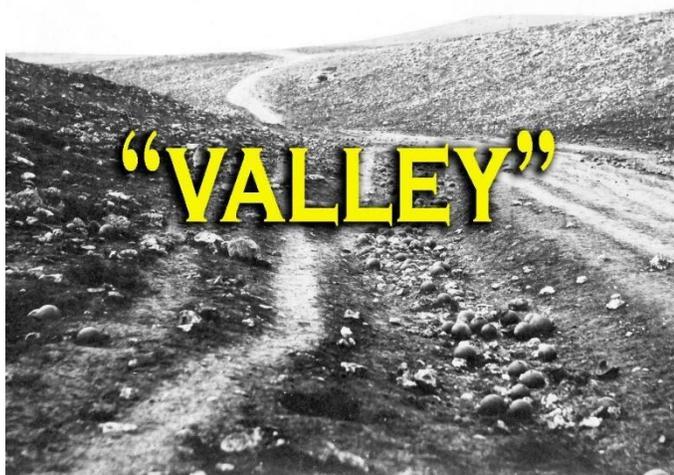
What a powerful confession of faith! What an amazing affirmation of God’s presence!

This morning, let me briefly emphasize my three insights:



**(1) BE STRONG:**

We are walking **“through the valley of the shadow of death.”** The word **“valley”** is important here.



In order to go home or to your destination safely, you must go through all kinds of the valleys in your life. The valleys of trials; The valleys of hardships; The valleys of hitting the bottom in life.

However, **“valley”** is temporary. Even though you have no idea how long or how rough the valley will be, it will be over, and you will be home. Be strong – especially in times like this. You will make it through. You’ve got to be strong!

This is the time for you to be more active. Even when you are staying home, if you would like to be creative, you can turn your passive lifestyle into an active one.

In Ephesians 6:10, Paul urges us: ... **be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.**



**(2) DO NOT BE AFRAID:**

The Sixteenth Century's French Philosopher Michel De Montaigne (1533-1592) once said: "My life has been full of terrible misfortunes most of which never happened."

As long as we are alive, living in fear is part of our life journey. All these fears we are experiencing in this life are indeed "**the shadow of death.**"

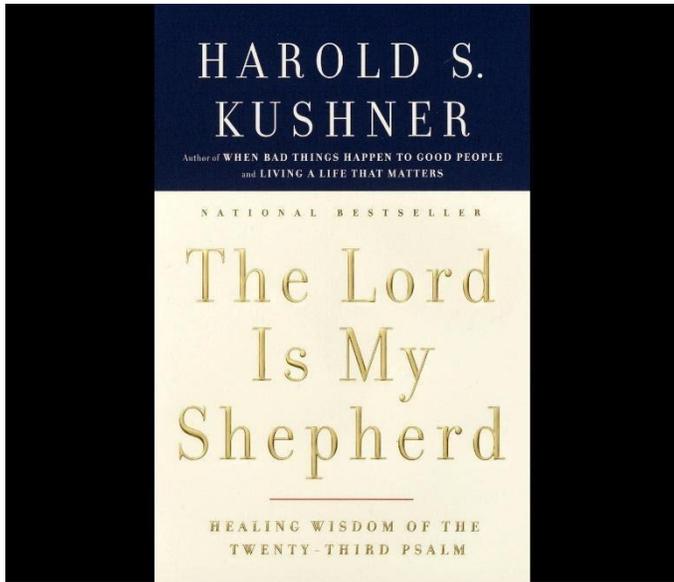
**"THE SHADOW  
OF DEATH"**

It's not real death. It's just the shadow of death.

What would be the most fearful thing that can happen to the people here and around the world? What are we most afraid of? What could be the worst thing that can happen to you?

Ultimately, it's your own death. Whether it's the Coronavirus, cancer, disaster, accident, or something else, when we face with death, in most cases, we experience fears of dying. But remember: these fears are merely **"the shadow of death."**

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote in his book, The Lord Is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm:



I think this book is the best book on Psalm 23 that I have ever read!

"Philosophers may tell us that death is really a good thing, that living forever would be unbearable, and that knowing we are mortal forces us to concentrate on what we want our lives to be about.

"But despite their wise words, it is still scary thing to know that we will one day die and leave behind those we love and those who love us.

"The valley of the shadow is a frightening, unsettling place, but religion has something to offer us to make it less frightening." (p. 90)

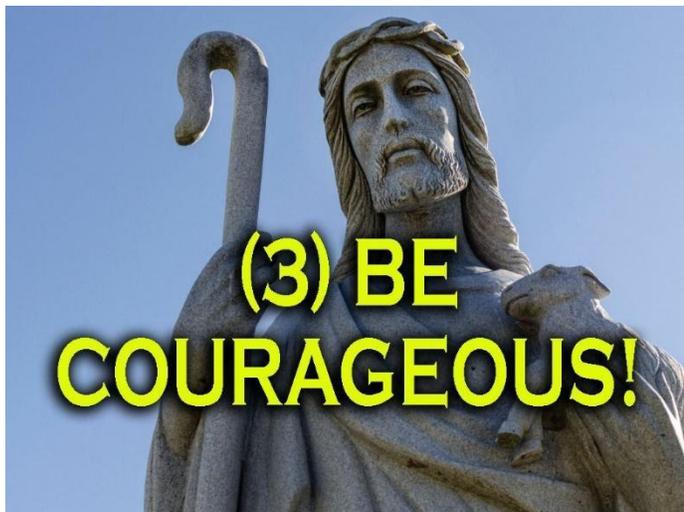
Even though we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death or the shadow of anything, we will fear no evil, because God is with us. God is the living God! So, do not be afraid!

Whenever it seems or appears to be frightening, it is just a shadow, not a real danger. God is your Light, your Peace, your Comfort, and your Strength!

This morning's Gospel is from John 16 when Jesus shares his farewell discourse with his disciples. Pay attention to V. 32: **"A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.**

Everyone is scattered and stays at home. Sound familiar? In v. 33 Jesus assures us with his presence: “... **In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.**”

Yes, even though in this world we are going through this valley of trouble, we are not to be afraid of anything. Take heart, for Jesus is with you always and forever!

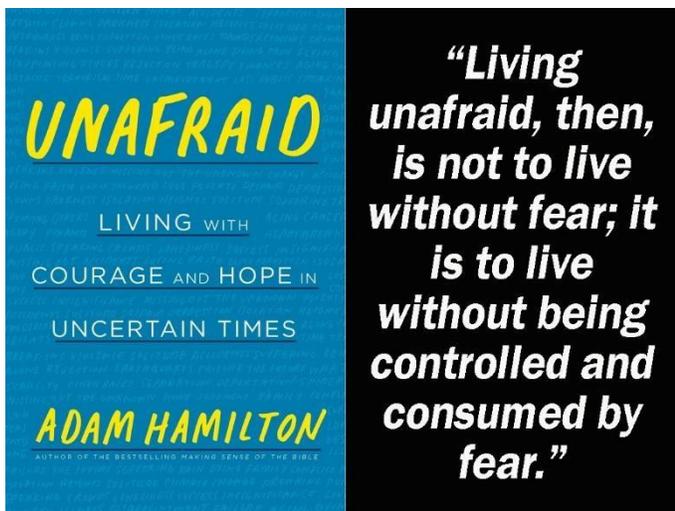


### (3) BE COURAGEOUS

Even before the time of the Coronavirus Pandemic, we human beings have always been living with fears. Our Christian life we try to pursue is not a “problem-free” life or any “perfect” life without any worries or anxieties.

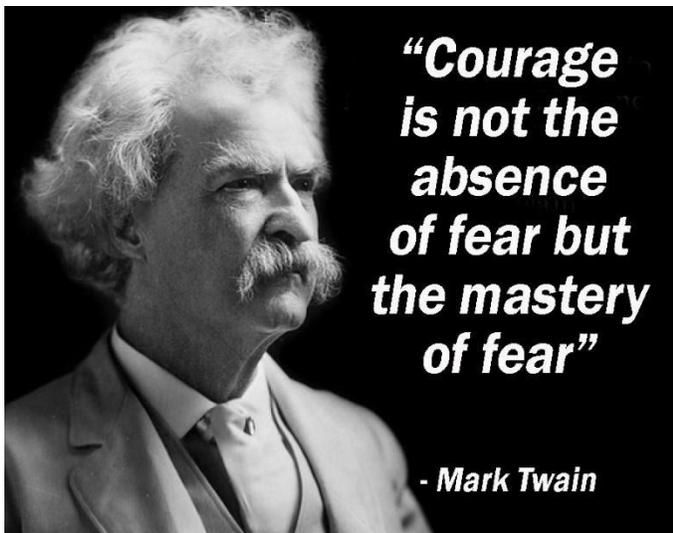
Struggling with fears, after all, are not always bad things. Experiencing fears means that you are still alive! That’s a good thing! Yes, fears can sometimes help us to be awake and even to motivate us.

That’s why our human “capacity to fear is a gift,” according to Adam Hamilton. In his book Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times, he writes:



“Living unafraid, then, is not to live without fear; it is to live without being controlled and consumed by fear.” (p. 228)

American writer Samuel Langhorne Clemens, also known by his pen name - Mark Twain, once said: **“Courage is not the absence of fear but the mastery of fear.”**



So true! And the courage comes from fearing no one or fearing absolutely nothing in the whole universe but God only.

Proverbs 1:7, **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...”**

The Hebrew word **“Fear”** (“yirah”) can be translated into many English words. Of course, in many cases, the word means “punishment” or “discipline.”

However, when you use the phrase “fear of the Lord,” the word “fear” means “respect” and “reverence.” Yes, it’s your unwavering faith in God, and no matter what circumstances you go through, you let God be God. It’s your total reliance, obedience, and trust in God.

In his book Unafraid, the author Adam Hamilton quotes Sister Irene Nowell, an Old Testament Scholar: “The fear of the Lord is the awareness that God is God and I am not... I am glad that God is God and I am not!”

**“The fear of the Lord is the awareness that God is God and I am not... I am glad that God is God and I am not!”**

**- Sister Irene Nowell**

God, who is the Creator of the universe, and who created YOU and loves YOU unconditionally, got your back!!

So, be bold! Be courageous!

When Moses passed away, his successor Joshua took over the leadership of the entire Israelites. They were not there yet, even after a long journey of almost 40 years.

I can imagine that they had no idea how long their journey to the Promised Land would take at that time. They were still yet to cross the Jordan. They were extremely exhausted and still living in fear and uncertainty.

However, God spoke to Joshua and the people to be strong and courageous, especially in the time of fears.

Joshua 1:9, **"I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."**

I believe that being courageous is more than just being strong! Being strong is just enough for yourself to sustain life.

On the other hand, being courageous is when you see other people and, in your given situation, you dare practicing God's love for others.

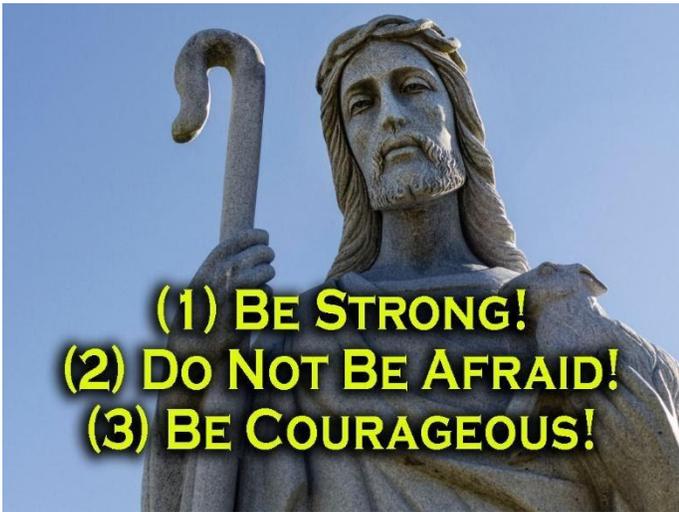
I am not saying you must be a hero. But you can be creative to help others in need in your own way and with your gifts and abilities. But the most important thing is your availability!

In my Pastoral Letter dated Friday, March 20<sup>th</sup>, I wrote this as the conclusion: "...let us turn this hard and unusual time into an opportunity to pray more, encourage more, and connect more with one another, by using our church's Photo Directory, and for other people in the nation and around the world."

My sisters and brothers in Christ! My friends! And everyone who is worshipping with us this morning!

Everyday things are rapidly changing. We are feeling like we are walking on thin ice. And we are indeed! We fear that we might drown, not knowing what's going to happen next.

But remember the three things I have shared with you:



Be Strong; Do Not Be Afraid; and Be Courageous!

Because the Lord is your Good Shepherd who would be with you.

I'd like to close my sermon with Apostle Paul's encouraging words in a time of trials:

Philippians 4:6-7

**Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

Thanks be to God! **Amen!**