

[PRAYER] [BLANK] Happy Mother’s Day! I am so glad to see you all. All of us have a mother, and many of you are, or have been, mothers, too, and acted as mothers for people. We are so blessed to have life through our mothers, just like we are blessed that God came from heaven to earth as Jesus, our Christ, born of Mary. And Creation itself is born of God, the parent of everything, and everyone, all of us born into life, through God’s grace.

Mothers leave marks on our lives that seem to last forever. [MOTHER] My own mother is no exception. Louise Steiner Blossom was quite something. She was very small and sick when she was born, and her parents weren’t sure that she’d live for a couple of years. But she pulled through, and grew to a towering four feet eleven inches - on a good day! But for her size, she packed a punch. Born of a steel magnolia and a southern gentleman, raised a Connecticut Yankee, she was blunt, smart, passionate, and had a voice that you couldn’t miss. When I was a kid, I would wander off sometimes in the supermarket, and I never worried about where my mother was - her voice, and her cough from smoking, was easy to pick out clear across the store! If you wonder why I talk so loud sometimes, well, the apple didn’t fall far from the tree! [BLANK]

That distinctive voice, that sound of someone who comforts us, and guides us, is part of who we are as living creatures. [SHEPHERD] Sheep are no exception. In the middle east, even today, shepherds manage their herds of sheep with the same tools that shepherds had in bible times - a rod, a staff, and their voice. The rod is a thin stick that is a bit like a whip. The staff is a longer, stronger tick, sometimes crooked, like we see in our Christmas pageants. But the most important tool that a shepherd has is his voice. [SHEEP] As Jesus said in John’s gospel, the sheep really do know their shepherd’s voice. When two herds of sheep meet on a road, or in a town, all a shepherd has to do is to call out to his own sheep, and they will know exactly who to follow. They know the sound of their shepherd. They trust that the shepherd’s voice will guide them to safety, even in places that put them against their limits - even dark places, like in the 23rd Psalm, where they cannot see other sheep easily. The sheep need to see other sheep around them to feel safe - and they need to hear their shepherd, so they can follow him to safety. [BLANK]

It’s not really so different for us, is it? We need the comfort of others like us who are guided and guarded by our leaders. My mother’s voice gave me comfort in the store, not because it was a soft and soothing voice, but because it was a familiar voice. I knew what she could get us home, to have dinner, and to have a safe place to live. And I needed family and trusted friends around me, to help me to feel safe, to be able to relax, and not feel stressed.

Following Jesus as our shepherd is like that, but in a deeper way, a more extreme way. If you listen to the soothing words of the 23rd psalm, you realize that these comforting words give us assurance, and hope, in the middle of extreme circumstances. First, we have that sense of assurance from God that our needs will be met - “I shall not want.” God as our shepherd leads us beside still waters - not troubled waters, where we might drown, or not hear trouble coming. God restores our soul, the Psalm says. We get

our spiritual tank replenished by God’s grace.

This is all true, but then notice what happens next in the 23rd Psalm. “He leads me in paths of righteousness, for his name’s sake.” God wants us to go on the right paths. Not easy paths, notice, not fun paths, necessarily, but the paths in our journey of life that will reflect well on the reputation of God as our loving shepherd, the one who is responsible for our well being, at all times. If we are to be who we are, we have to let God be who God is as our guide. Grace comes to us to get us ready for things that are not defined by our limits, but by the limitless love of God.

And then, just like that, wham! The 23rd Psalm says, “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.” God takes away our sense of want, fills us with good things, give us peace, and then takes us on a journey where we are against the limits of our instincts, our faith, our trust, and our sense of being a part of an affirming group, who follow our God, our shepherd. And the shepherd comforts us not with a flashlight, not with even words, but with a rod, and a staff. God, our shepherd, knows that when we’re afraid, when we’re against the limits of our faith, and wanting to trust only our instincts. we might not even be in a mood to hear God’s voice! The firmness of God’s guidance is what we really need in those darkest, most dangerous moments. God’s touches us, with the things that point us in the right direction - the things that keep us trusting in God’s love, no matter what.

And when we start to follow God, even when it’s darkest, even when we cannot hear God calling to us, we being to find comfort and strength on the other side of these experiences that gives us strength and peace in the least likely of places. The 23rd Psalm says that after our journey in dark places, trusting in God’s rod and staff, God prepares a table for us to eat at, not in a comfy, safe place, but in the presence of our enemies! If you’ve ever had to have a meal with people who are angry with you, I think that you’ll have a sense of what this means. Can you imagine a sheep grazing in a beautiful field, at peace, right under the noses of wolves, and jackals, and coyotes? The paths of righteousness that God gives us push us against our limits, so that we can discover moments of peace, and safety, far beyond what we could ask for or imagine.

Even in the middle of people who are at war with us, God can offer us moral and spiritual peace. Our heads can be anointed with oil, getting us ready for the most intimate and transforming contact with God, contact that can take us not just against our limits, but beyond our limits. Our cup can run over, filled to the brim and beyond with good things in our heart, good things that we cannot help but to share with others, and with God. We get these things so abundantly, so surely, that the 23rd Psalm ends, “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.” Against, and beyond, our limits, God provides us with limitless peace, limitless security, limitless goodness, limitless mercy, for all time.

It is goodness and mercy that lasts not just to to limits of our life, but beyond the limits of our life. In John’s gospel, Jesus, our true shepherd, the true voice of God, promises eternal life for those who follow the voice of God in Jesus. Jesus wants to take

us all in, as God’s flock in Jesus, not just up to the gates of heaven, but through them. God wants us all to cling to one another in Christ, like sheep trusting together in their shepherd, trusting in God’s righteous path, comforted by God’s loving rod and staff, not just to get from one point to another in life, but past the limits of all points in life. Our trust in Jesus has a purpose.

My mother did not have an easy end to her life. One evening, she had a stroke, and was clinically dead. They revived her, and she managed to live a few months longer, still fairly clear in her mind, but very weak. One day, I went with my family to visit her and my father, to celebrate their anniversary. As we sat around the table talking, after dinner, my mother sat across the table from me, looking at me with wide eyes, and a quiet smile. She had already risen from death. She knew where she was going. The rod and the staff had already comforted her, Her head was already anointed. Her cup was already overflowing. Surely God’s goodness and mercy had followed her, imperfect as she was, all of her life, and she was getting ready to dwell in the house of the Lord, forever. And soon after, God’s angels assured me, she did.

We need not fear death. We need not fear life. God’s love, in Jesus Christ, offering us new life, now, and forever, makes this fearless new life possible. There will be dark moments. There will be times when we lose track of others who Jesus shepherds. There will be many times when we must share tables with our enemies, and God’s enemies. But the rod, the staff, the voice, of of Jesus, our God, our savior, risen from the dead, will comfort us, in God’s way. The Lord is our shepherd. We shall not want. Happy Mother’s Day. Amen.