

Sermon “Faith vs. Helplessness”
Kirk of St James
Sunday March 15, 2026
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

When Fran and I sit down to plan hymns one of the things we consult is the suggested hymns for the lectionary readings that week. When we opened to the suggestions for this Sunday and I saw a bunch of shepherd hymns my initial reaction was, “Ugh, is it the 23rd Psalm again?” Don’t get me wrong, it is a beautiful Psalm BUT because of how often we tend to hear it I mostly pass on it in the lectionary. However, after several experiences this week I came back around to Psalm 23 and I will explain why.

For anyone who has worked in retail or public facing jobs they will likely tell you that certain things affect the moods of people. So, for example, on a warm summer day people will come in and often they are cheery, easier to deal with, and even when you might have not have the things they want in stock or on the menu etc., they tend to be gracious. Other days if it has been a string of cold rainy days, people can be more easily irritated or frustrated. I know we have some doctors and nurses in this congregation but my aunt who was a nurse said she could tell from the emergency room if it was a full moon without ever sticking her head out a door.

Well, this week I am not sure what you have found but around here and even at home it was an off week. We had the time change last Sunday, our car broke down, a week of up and down messy weather, Monday night the regiment band broke a key in a door and couldn’t get to the commonwealth service, on Tuesday at presbytery it felt like none of us could get on the same page, people were tired, schools were delayed one day, cancelled the next, meetings moved around, then my blood pressure landed me rather unexpectedly in my doctors office Friday and perhaps unsurprisingly it was also Friday the 13th. Interrupter clauses for sky rocketing gas prices, horrific global news, and we could go on. Everywhere I went through all

these different experiences there were conversations. People talking about anxiety, money, uncertainty, and frustration—these are not the easiest days.

Psalm 23 is a passage for times just like these, because while it expresses hope it also acknowledges the difficulties of life. As verse four says " Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The imagery of the valley of the shadow of death is a stark one. Among green hills and quiet streams, there are dangerous and difficult places--those valleys we all must face in life. By the end of this week, I thought I was just angry. Angry at how helpless we are when we look at big impossible situations like the suffering in Gaza, what is happening to civilians in Iran, the continued war in Ukraine. Angry at cars that don't work, and gas prices, and wonky blood pressure. However, that also wasn't entirely right because once the anger burnt out, it was really grief. I can't help but wonder if a lot of what we as a society have been feeling is grief.

Grief when broken down to its most basic definition can be described as "the normal and natural reaction to loss of any kind." It can be the loss of tangible things like a job, a way of life, a friendship, a marriage, or a person. It can also be things that are more intangible but none the less hold meaning for us like a dream, or a goal, or trust. One grief book named over forty different triggers including death, divorce, death of a pet, moving, starting school, marriage, graduation, health changes, retirement, holidays, empty nest etc. Every person will encounter grief at some point in their lives--the valleys if you will. The question becomes how we will deal with them. As one writer pointed out "We are far better prepared to deal with minor accidents than we are to deal with grief. We receive more education about simple first aid than we do about death, divorce and other emotional losses."

If we were to do a show of hands right now a number of us have likely taken a first aid course of some sort to deal with physical hurt, but what happens when what wounds us is not

visible or sometimes even fully tangible to us? Maybe what some of us are feeling is grief, and maybe for others it is something else like anger, frustration or anxiety, but whatever we are feeling Psalm 23 has some words of comfort to offer.

We will face valleys in our lives, some of them may be shallow and we will barely notice them, while others may feel like they go so deep we are not sure how we will ever climb out the other side. The difficult part of grief and other big emotions is that it is a lot like water that leaks into a roof during a storm. It will trickle down and down into the walls until it either finds an outlet, or it gets stuck and begins to do more damage. We need outlets for what we are feeling but sometimes that is difficult in our western society.

Michelle Steinke-Baumgard is a fitness coach, author, and motivational speaker. Her husband died when he was 37 and she began a long journey of grief. What she discovered was that "Western society has created a neat little "grief box" where we place the grieving and wait for them to emerge fixed and whole again. The grief box is small and compact, and it comes full of expectations that range from time frames to physical appearance. Everyone who has been pushed into the grief box understands its confining limitations, but all of our collective voices together can't seem to change the intense indignation of a society too emotionally stifled to speak the truth. It's become easier to hide our emotional depth than to reveal our vulnerability and risk harsh judgment. When asked if we are alright, it's simpler to say yes and fake a smile then, to be honest, and show genuine human emotion." If we do not feel that we can be authentic in our emotions and, if we as Christians sometimes have the additional burden of feeling that we are not faithful enough, or doing "something" enough it makes it doubly hard.

What this Psalm today affirms is that we will never have to go through these valleys alone. It also affirms that these valleys are a normal part of life. There really is no wrong way to grieve (unless we are doing something that is harmful to ourselves, or others) there is no time

limit, and it can be complex. One grief expert wrote that when it comes to grief the best thing we can do is grieve. "The better you grieve, the worse it feels, at least for a time. Just get down into it and do it. Cry often and do it with gusto. Get help with it if you need to. Grief will control you less as you express it more. It will get better, as will you, day by day. But if crying really isn't your style, seek out other ways to open the valve and let your pain out. There are many ways to process a loss: through artistic expression, physical activity, prayer, meditation, talking with friends, professional counselling, spending time in nature--even whacking the heck out of a golf ball! The important thing is to find as many healthy outlets as possible for your experience."

We will all experience grief and other challenging emotions of varying degrees. We will have valleys where life is difficult and we wonder what way we should go. Psalm 23 stands as a confident promise that we will never do these things alone. That there is always hope to be found as we believe in the promises of God--He is the shepherd that will not leave us. This is a Psalm for day-to-day living, and for healing. "We see the darkness around us lose its power in the midst of the Lord's presence, and we are restored." Find outlets to allow the hurtful emotions to run out of your life in ways that are healing for you. Hold onto the promises of God that Psalm 23 describes. Remember also that you are surrounded by a community who loves you and are willing to walk with you. These are difficult and uncertain days, we are in this together, and together we pray for the world around us.