

“The Comfort of Familiarity”
Psalm 23

Pastor Liz Miller
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It took me most of this week but I finally settled on a metaphor that speaks to what the past nine days have felt like for me. Do you remember the first time you were in a place where you didn't speak the same language as the people around you? Perhaps it was your first time traveling across the ocean to another country or even your first time visiting the United States? Perhaps it was in the next town over while shopping in an international grocery store or visiting a Greek Orthodox worship service? Do you remember what it feels like to try to accomplish basic tasks but you don't know how to communicate them? “How much is the candy bar?” “Where is the bathroom?” “How do I find the B Train?” “How many of these coins make five euros?”

When you are somewhere and you can't speak the local language, even the smallest of tasks feels daunting when it requires speaking with someone or reading a sign you don't understand. Everything feels like it takes twice as long as it should, and it is easy to get frustrated or feel stupid or give up and go back to your safe hotel room or home as quickly as possible. Everything feels new and unfamiliar, and it quickly overwhelms our brains and stresses us out.

That is what this past week felt like to me. Everything was brand new. Everything was a little bit different than I am used to such that I had to carefully think through what I was doing, how I was communicating, and what was the best way to accomplish it. I wanted to support local restaurants by ordering takeout but I would call and discover they had different hours or a limited menu, making me rethink what I was going to have for dinner. I showed up at a grocery store to pick up some produce only to discover it was designated as Senior Shopping Hour, meaning I could wait in my car for 30 minutes or try again another day. I wanted to talk with my mom on

her birthday but instead of just Facetiming when my California family was all in the same place, we had to figure out how to meet on Zoom from our separate homes - who was hosting, what did we need to download, what's the code...

Individually these are all minor inconveniences or changes, but every day had dozens of them stacked on top of each other, making it feel as if I am in a foreign land where the only thing I can expect is that I'm not really sure what I'm doing and I'm making it up as I go along, hoping that the people I talk to are kind enough to forgive me my mistakes and that I am kind enough to forgive theirs. Our brains are oriented toward finding and making patterns - we long for what is familiar or what connects us to other experiences we've had, so this season of quarantine for many of us feels disorienting and uncertain - it does not feel familiar. It does not feel like anything we have done before. It feels brand new and a bit scary.

This week I have been craving comfort and familiarity like never before. Sometimes it is comfort food, which means cookie dough has become a daily snack. I choose cookie dough over cookies because we no longer have time to wait for the important things in life. Sometimes it's the people who bring me comfort so I have been texting and Facetiming with friends near and far, talking to my family more than ever, and rejoicing whenever a familiar face joins one of Edgewood's Zoom hangouts because it is one place where I don't have to overthink, we just hang out together, laughing at silly things, and sharing stories from our lives.

Although we often think of the arts as enrichment, this week they have been a source of deep comfort. Musicians have been offering music online, children's authors have been freeing up the rights to their books so that communities can have virtual storytelling time with kids, and movies and plays are being played on streaming services so we can get lost in familiar stories

and far away lands. On Thursday night I gathered together with almost 60 thousand of my closest friends to watch the Indigo Girls host a live concert from their living room.

I have seen the Indigo Girls live almost a dozen times in my life because I'm that big of a lesbian, but this was one of the most moving concerts ever. Not only did they play all my favorite songs, but across the bottom of the screen flashed comments from across the world. I was notified whenever a friend tuned in and soon I was watching with the old college friend who took me to my first Indigo Girls concert in 2003, family members who I didn't even realize knew who the Indigo Girls were, and my old favorite neighbors from Connecticut which made me feel like we were watching together in their living room. I even saw a comment appear that said, "We're watching from Michigan!" and when I looked at the name I realized, "I know that person! That's Peggy Dunn! Hi Peggy!" Somehow across the distance music brought us together and united us as one people, singing the same songs in unison in our separate living rooms.

In a time when everything feels new and uncertain, we crave familiarity. It's how our bodies, minds, and spirits work. We are continually looking for touchstones that remind us who we are, what we believe, and what we are called to do in this moment. We look for things that remind us we have been here before and that we will get through this too. We look for ways connect with others as acts of reassurance and resetting our energy back to whatever normal feels like these days.

Earlier this week in a clergy group I asked, "Is there some kind of quarantine lectionary that assigns scripture texts for a time such as this?" It felt inconceivable that what had been planned long in advance would still speak to today. And yet, when I turned to the pre-assigned text for this Sunday, I found Psalm 23, the most comforting and familiar of all Psalms, one of the most quoted and beloved passages of scripture in the whole Bible. What text could be more

perfect for this week? How did it just happen to come up in the regular rotation that has been in place for many, many years? It feels like the Holy Spirit at work.

I am so thankful for Psalm 23 this morning. We probably most often associate it with funerals, but that is because it is so assuring of God's embrace and presence in our lives, in this moment. The Lord is my shepherd. God makes me lie down. God leads me. God restores my soul...When I can't find the words on my own, or when I can't make sense out of the world, Psalm 23 speaks for me. My favorite line is "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..." When I feel tired and broken, I hear this and I am reminded that mercy is my guide. Mercy will always be present. I'm reminded that even though we've had a hard week, there is more goodness in the world. And in the goodness, we will find God.

As each of us has tried to find places and moments of comfort this week, goodness rose out of our collective spirit. People are determined to care for each other no matter the physical distance. Edgewood's phone tree was the first thing that was activated and our team has taken serious their call to reach out to folks. Neighbors are hanging out together across their lawns and making sure that everyone has what they require. People are volunteering their time and resources to whoever has a need. When we look for things that are comforting, we turn to love. We seek to grow that love, to serve in our community, and to make a difference in the world. Love is not new or unsettling. It is what is more familiar than anything else. It is the work that brings a balm to our spirits as well as to those who are helped.

The Psalm reads, "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." We have been marked for love, for outreach. We have been marked and blessed to live a life of service and compassion. Of all the difficulties in this time, surely our cup overflows with the opportunity to love each other, love ourselves, and love God in new and unexpected ways that somehow feel

familiar and as old as time. Even in this new season that are gifts waiting for us to discover, the Holy Spirit is at work among us, and God is sowing seeds of love wherever we turn. May we have the wisdom and courage to nurture them as they grow. Amen.