

5.3.20 Er4 All the Days of Our Lives

- It's been about 50 days, more or less, since we started staying at home, except for essential work and vital errands
 - I don't know what that looks like for you, but let me share with you some of my quirkiest insights and practices during this time
 - First, it's never too early for chocolate, even if I'm still eating my cereal
 - Second, as those of you watching on video can see, my hair is now longer than the grass of my lawn
 - And third, I can often go a whole day without putting on my shoes, and I enjoy shaving once a week – I shaved this morning to record this video, of course
 - I do see a few people while video conferencing through the week, and we are usually dressed down compared to when I'm at the church office and the other people are doing their thing
 - So how about you?
 - If you are pretty much confined to home, are you eating chocolate for breakfast?
 - If you are going to work, how's that going?
 - But when I ask how you are, it's really about more than chocolate or your hair or whether you are wearing shoes
 - The really important indicators of how you and I are doing are much more than skin deep
- You see it's really difficult for me to tell how people are REALLY doing
 - Many council people and other leaders are calling church members to check in
 - And of course friends call friends, because that's what friends and family do
 - And I have made over 150 phone calls now to members, and still have a way to go to get to the end of the alphabet of even our most active members
- But as I have talked to people, on the one hand I have found that so many people say that they are okay and doing well, but on the other hand – I can't help but wonder

- I can't help but wonder what's happening deep down to the people who I know, but cannot see – and who I know, but can only hear as a voice on the phone
- And I wonder, because church members are not an exception to these statistics – in the end, we are just like everyone else
 - Almost half of us will experience some kind of mental illness in our lifetimes, and I'm sure that the fear of life-threatening infection, and the stress of quarantine doesn't help, and it probably weighs heavily on all of us
- So now I want to share two things with everyone today
 - One is to encourage people to reach out for help for themselves, or when you see others struggling to encourage them to reach out for help
 - And the other, is remind all of us of God's enduring love
- Now let me take the latter of the two first, so let me remind you of God's enduring love
 - And let me be clear – the assurance of God's love IS NOT a substitute for reaching out for mental health services
 - God's emotional healing most often works through the gifts and daily ministry of others, such as therapists, counselors, and if needed, medication
 - And yet of course, another much-needed part of our lives especially in this time, is the assurance that the overwhelming witness of scripture in the face of the temptation to hear either our worst inner voices or the worst of other "so-called" church voices that see the coronavirus as God's judgment or punishment – the overwhelming witness of scripture is that God loves us, and the overwhelming witness of the Easter Good News is that Jesus Christ died and was raised to forgive sin and to give life even now, and finally the overwhelming and overflowing heart of the Christ-centered gospel is that we do not earn God's love, but that God's mercy and love is a gift that is freely given
 - Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter is popularly called SHEPHERD SUNDAY, because every year on this day we hear comforting and assuring scripture lessons that

declare that Jesus is the good shepherd who cares for all his sheep, including us

- Remember how God is described in the well-known and beloved 23rd Psalm that I read a few minutes ago?
 - God is the shepherd who provides for our needs
 - God is with us and comforts us
 - God walks with us through the dark places in our lives
 - God promises table fellowship us
 - And God's goodness and mercy follows us in the days of lives, and even beyond
- We cannot put a price on that love, but instead, God gives it to us for free
- And now the other thing to share
 - Because you are so beloved by God, because you are worth so much to God, if you have need to reach out for help, I am sure that God wants you to
 - Some of us need to reach out for mental health, domestic violence, or addiction, and the rest of us will support you if you do, and here are two numbers that you can call [PLACE SIGN OVER PULPIT] – 911 if you or anyone is in imminent danger, or 877-9WE-HELP for mental health crises and other services
- So as children of God who may not only eat chocolate for breakfast, but also watch their hair grow and often forego wearing shoes throughout the day, we can still call one another and ask how each other is doing
- But if we see or hear that we ourselves or someone else needs help, we can reach out and call, or encourage others to call
- And in the meantime let us covenant with one another to continue to pray for each other, and above all, to share with each other and our neighbors the good news that first in Psalm 23, and then later in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that despite what we are enduring now, God's goodness and mercy DOES follow us all the days of our lives and even beyond.