

“Grace in the Valley” – Psalm 23
A Sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork, Associate Minister
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Loving God, we thank you for your grace, guidance, and compassionate presence in our lives. As we reflect on your shepherding care throughout this journey of life and faith, may we open our hearts once more to your Spirit and to your word to us this day. Amen.

Today, we begin a new sermon series to coincide with our fall stewardship campaign, *The Beauty of Resilience*. Our Business Affairs Commission chair, Jeff Gidley, came across that phrase a few months ago in some news coverage about the Olympic Games. Certainly, elite athletes know a lot about resilience. You don't get very far in athletics without the ability to overcome obstacles and challenges, work through defeats, recover from injuries, and regain strength that may have been lost.

And perhaps, resilience is one of those words you've been hearing quite a lot lately as humanity has collectively navigated the last nineteen months through the coronavirus pandemic. I know I have. In fact, I was chatting with someone the other day who said, "I think I've used the words, pivot and resilience, more in the last year and a half than ever before in my life." Me too. Anyone else?

In our home and family lives, in our work lives, in our various groups and communities, and here in our church, we have all had to learn how to pivot, change plans, and find new ways of doing all sorts of things. We have all had to practice flexibility. And hopefully we have all learned something about resilience.

Resilience is generally something we learn by practicing it. And it strikes me that often, our life experiences may force a resilience lesson upon us whether we want it or not. Whether it is a collective experience like the pandemic or a more personal experience like an illness or injury, or a profound loss like the death of a loved one, or a major life shift like a job loss (or even just a job change), or a breakup or a divorce, all of these experiences can teach resilience. And it may take a while for us to feel very resilient.

But we also might surprise ourselves by how resilient we can be. I will never forget what one of my seminary professors said one time when talking about the reality of human suffering and how we might walk alongside people and offer care as others navigate difficult circumstances. He cautioned us to be very careful about how we talk about other people's experiences and to not say things like, "I could never deal with that," or "I'd rather die than go through what that person is going through." He spoke about his own experience navigating serious illness and how he found that he could endure far more than he thought he could at the beginning. He learned some profound lessons on resilience. Perhaps you've had a similar experience in your own life.

However, we don't have to always be going through something big to learn something about resilience. Overcoming smaller challenges and stressors also helps us build up and strengthen our capacity for resilience. It's like weight training for our resilience muscles that can help prepare us to deal with bigger challenges when they arise.

The American Psychological Association lists five key components that can help people become more resilient, whether we're going through something challenging or just want to build up our capacity for resilience.

The first is to *build connections* – including prioritizing one-on-one relationships that are life-giving for us, as well as joining groups that can offer support and care.

The second is to *foster wellness* – including caring for our bodies with adequate sleep, nutrition, and exercise, as well as practicing mindfulness (including meditation, prayer, or other spiritual practices that support our mental and spiritual health), and avoiding the tendency to mask our pain or distract ourselves through negative or harmful behaviors.

The third is to *find purpose* – including finding ways of helping others (which, as we know, often helps us at the same time), as well as being proactive and working towards realistic goals in our lives (we may not be able to solve everything, but we can tackle some things and those small successes make a difference), and, all the while, looking for opportunities for self-discovery and learning that may emerge from our experiences.

The fourth is to *embrace healthy thoughts* – including keeping things in perspective, learning to accept that change is part of life, maintaining a hopeful outlook to the best of our ability, and learning from our past experiences to help us in our present circumstances.

And the fifth is to *seek help* when needed – a therapist can provide a listening ear, helpful feedback, and other resources, so can support groups.

(for more information visit: <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>)

In reflecting upon this list, it sure strikes me that being a part of a church community can help with many of these things. At its best, church helps us build relationships and a sense of mutually-caring community that supports our holistic wellness. Church helps us find purpose and channel our desire to serve into meaningful actions that help people. Church helps us learn, grow, and develop spiritual practices that can enhance our lives and help carry us through tougher times. Church also helps us broaden our perspective and see how our individual stories are part of a much bigger story of human history and of God's ever-unfolding relationship with humanity.

It also strikes me that people have always understood the things we need to thrive. Our ancient and beloved Psalm 23 talks about God as a shepherd who provides the necessities of life – food and water, rest, and protection from harm; along with the things we need to live well – spiritual restoration, love, grace, and guidance.

Psalm 23 proclaims that God actively leads us through life. We hear this psalm read at many funerals, but it's not just about how God carries us beyond death into eternal life. Most of the psalm is about how God tends to us in our daily living.

A number of commentators note that the word that is translated as "follow" in verse six, "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" might actually be better translated as "pursue." Likewise, the word that is translated as mercy can also be translated as love. Surely goodness and *love* shall *pursue* us all of our days. Personally, I find that reading to be an even more powerful proclamation that God is active and present. God is not passive and absent. Instead, God's love pursues us.

Even, perhaps especially, in the *darkest valley* (or in the *valley of the shadow of death*, as the familiar King James Version translates it), God's love pursues us. God doesn't abandon us, just as a shepherd wouldn't abandon their flock.

Many of the biblical authors of both testaments love this metaphor of sheep and shepherd. It appears a lot. Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd. But I know some people don't like being compared to sheep. They have the reputation of being kind of dumb. When left on their own, without a shepherd's care, they can be prone to accidents or become easy prey for wolves. And, it's true, human lives, relationships, ambitions, and understandings of purpose and meaning are much more complex than those of sheep.

Still, being a sheep is not all bad. For me, I find the reminder that we are part of a *flock* to be a source of comfort. We are not all alone in this. We don't have to find our way through the dark valleys all by ourselves. And we're not left all to our own devices. We have a shepherd to guide us.

And we have fellow sheep to accompany us. And even when we have a hard time seeing where the shepherd is or it feels like the shepherd is too far away (because sometimes we do feel that way), we have each other to remind us that the shepherd's *love* is actually always near, always pursuing us, always present in our lives, and can be found in community.

We all walk through various dark valleys in this life. And together, we've been walking through the dark valley of a pandemic for over a year and half. Even as life has carried on, it's a valley that has brought various challenges for most of us. And it's brought real loss and grief for millions of people across the globe.

And, in many ways, we are still in it and still walking through it. And it can feel a little discouraging at times when we feel like we might be turning a corner and emerging out of this valley and into the sunlight, only to encounter another twist in the road and find out that's not the case just yet.

At times, it's tested our patience. It's tested our faith. It's tested our capacity to stay hopeful. And it's tested our resilience. But it's probably also taught us something about patience, faith, hope, and resilience.

One of the lessons I think this experience has taught us is that sometimes resilience takes the form of finding the will and strength to simply put one foot in front of the other and keep walking. Resilience is exhibited in the ability to keep going... despite our spiritual and physical fatigue, despite the temptation to stop and give up, despite the obstacles and challenges we face.

Some days, as proverbial sheep, all we can do is try our best to follow the shepherd. Some days it is easier and some days it is harder. But continuing along, sticking together with our flock, and trying intentionally to follow where the shepherd leads, is never failure (even if some days it's not all that dramatic). It's faith. And those daily steps add up to a life-long journey that has an impact and contributes something positive to the world.

I think we can be very grateful with how well this congregation has traversed this pandemic together thus far. This church community has shown resilience, along with creativity, care, compassion, and generosity.

We've kept our core ministries alive, even as we've had to find new ways of doing things. This congregation has dealt well with an uncertain and changing landscape. This congregation has stuck together and cared for one another. This congregation continued to worship, and learn, and grow spiritually together. This congregation has continued to give generously to support not only our local church, but also to respond to the great needs in our broader community and world.

And so, I find myself in this moment filled with gratitude. And I have a lot of hope for our collective future at Bay Shore Church.

People are always talking about the future of the church in the world. Is church still relevant? What do we do about the fact that a majority of people in America don't claim any religious affiliation? How many local churches will have to close their doors? Will the church survive, let alone thrive?

Only time will tell how the bigger picture will develop. But right now, I have a lot of hope for the future survival and thriving of this church community. We still have much good to do and a committed community of people who want to work together to do it.

So, let's stay open to the God's call and pay attention to the ways in which God might be encouraging us to try new things. Let's stay resilient in the face of uncertain and changing circumstances. And let's keep following where our shepherd and this spiritual path lead us. And, through it all, surely goodness and love will pursue us our whole lives long.

Amen.