Pastoral Prayer
As countries throughout the world struggle to contain the Coronavirus, we ask for your guidance and protection. Be with those who worry about their own health and the health of their family and friends. Be with the families of those who are sick, quarantined or have lost loved ones. Guide and protect the medical professionals and researchers who seek to heal and, in doing so, put themselves at risk. May this be a time when the world joins together in harmony to promote healing and peace.

We pray for the United Methodist Church as this denomination faces uncertain times. We pray for this church and the ministry of Pastor Pam.

We ask for healing mercies to those who are battling cancer, the Flu, the Coronavirus, face surgery and suffer from other illnesses. Grant them comfort knowing you are with them in all places and at all times.

Likewise, we pray for our country, its leadership and for the safety of our military and their families.

May you, Our Creator, always be our hope, our delight, our refuge, our help in all situations. We ask all this in the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ.

Amen.

I am including an offering prayer to remind us that even though we are not gathering for worship this week, we need to be evermindful that all we have belongs to God.

Offering Prayer
Everlasting Creator: We are thankful that you are the light of the world, guiding our steps as we walk through life. Your Word says that the earth is yours and everything in it. And so, we acknowledge that our very lives and our possessions belong to you as well. Now, in praise and thanksgiving we offer back to you a portion of what you have first given us. Bless these gifts, as well as, the time, talents and prayers we offer. May all these gifts bless those who receive them. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Luke 12:22-34
Scripture Reading for Meditation – Psalm 23

Introduction
“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul, he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.”

Sound familiar? That is the King James Version of Psalm 23. One thing I like about this Psalm is that it is so familiar to most of us, even to those who are not Christian. I also like the fact that the Psalms, as a collection of writings, is easy to find in the Bible. If you open to the middle of your Bible you will probably land somewhere in the Book of Psalms. A flip or two of the pages and you will find the chapter you are looking for. Some say that placing the Book of Psalms in the center of our Christian Bible is not by accident but intentionally placed so it will fall at the “heart” of our most precious book.

Jesus would have recited Psalm 23.... as his ancestors did 1000 years before he was born. It is an old passage and, as I looked it over this week, I asked myself, “What else can be said about this Psalm that hasn’t already been said?

I do have two questions for you to think about:
First - Where do we see Psalms 23 in writing other than in the Bible? (sympathy cards, inscribed on plaques or stained-glass windows, etc.)

Second - Where do we typically hear it read? (at funerals and committals) That is because there is a little phrase in verse 4 that says: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” Because of that phrase many think that this particular Psalm only applies to our physical death. But as I carefully read it again, I believe this Psalm is often misunderstood and misapplied. I would suggest this Psalm has way more to do with life than it does with death. It gives thoughtful lessons and truths we can live by...in the here and now.

Background - King David
The Book of Psalms is actually a book of prayers and songs written in Hebrew-style poetry. (Notice they don’t rhyme.) These poems were set to music to become a hymnal, called a Psalter, that was (and is) used in Synagogues to remind the Jews of their relationship with God, Yahweh. We have some of the same Psalms in the back of our Methodist Hymnal. Some of the Psalms were written by Moses and Solomon but most of them were written by David. He was a shepherd boy and a musician who later became the second King of Israel. His writings, even today, draw us into his world of shepherds and sheep, helping us imagine how the relationship of a shepherd and his sheep compares to the relationship of God to His people.

Movement in the Psalms
I want to mention that there will be aspects this poem that I will not cover today because of the time commitment. After all, there have been many books written about this very poem. I do love this Psalm. There is movement and stillness within its words that draw on your emotions. We move from quiet waters - to a dark valley - and then to the house of the Lord. An unusual poem... isn’t it? As I read the Psalm again three questions came to mind that challenge me as I journey through the hills and valleys of my life. I’m passing these questions on to you in hopes that they will challenge and assist you in developing a closer relationship with God.

God the Shepherd
In verse 1 – 3 the Psalm is quiet and gentle. God is seen as our shepherd. Here we imagine ourselves as his sheep in a field with green pastures and quiet waters with paths ahead of us. A restful place to be... a place where God restores our souls. We need that from time to time. Here we are reminded of the constant relationship between shepherd and sheep, between God and humankind as David proclaims, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

Isaiah, chapter 40 speaks of God as shepherd, saying: “He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart, he gently leads those that have young.”

God knows his sheep. God knows which sheep tend to wander off, which ones tend to bully the others, which ones are weak, which ones need extra attention. The idea of God as OUR shepherd is one of the most beautiful and comforting metaphors in the entire Bible.

David himself was a shepherd in Bethlehem.....He came from a family of shepherds. We know he was out watching his sheep as he was selected to be the next king of Israel. If you are a shepherd, the Psalm would make perfect sense. You would know the underlying relationship between the shepherd and his sheep. A farmer, likewise, is someone who is familiar with tending livestock and may understand Psalm 23. But, for most of us, we don’t even know a shepherd or have much contact with sheep... cute as they are. Sheep require more meticulous care and attention than any other form of livestock. They will die unless they have a shepherd who will take care of them. And so, it is no surprise that the Bible refers to us as sheep countless times...not that we are inadequate (as humans) but we are social beings that need each other. We are social beings that need guidance and care. We are social beings that have an “inborn” need for God’s nurturing love.
A Circle of White Fluff
When Glenn and I were in Ireland (several years ago) we saw plenty of sheep. Most of them marked on their back with some kind of paint to identify which flock they belonged to. I would have wanted to be in the “pink flock”. One day I noticed a, sort of, cluster of sheep on a hillside. As I got closer to take a photograph, I notice that this particular flock was all huddled tightly together with their little heads buried into the fur of their fellow sheep. They looked as if they were hiding. Their little tails were sticking out of a circle of white “fluff” .... and you could hear them “baaaaa-ing”. They didn’t seem to know what to do or where to go. When the shepherd came along, he had to separate his “bundle” of sheep with his staff, almost one at a time, just to be able to lead them...anywhere. Sheep do not navigate well. They need guidance, direction, sometimes nudging and discipline in order to find green pastures and fresh water. An Irishmen would tell you this is the “nature” of sheep and the “nature” of a good shepherd is to protect and guide his flock.

Listen to His Voice
Like sheep, we don’t have to walk alone, or be alone, or act alone. God, as our shepherd, is with us always...as a personal guide. You might ask, though, how does God guide us? I would say “many ways”!

In the Scriptures Abraham, Moses and Paul and others experienced a “supernatural” call from God that gave them direction. Abraham (known as Abram at the time) was told by the Lord to leave his country, his father’s household and go to an unknown land. With strong faith he did as God commanded. Moses encountered God through a burning bush, to give him instructions on how to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Saul (who became Paul) encountered God in a flash of light on the road to Damascus. This changed his life so completely that he became an advocate for Jesus.

Proverbs 3:6 tells us to “Listen for God’s voice in everything you do, everywhere you go”. I truly believe this yet sometimes it is hard to hear God’s voice. I have not seen any burning bushes or flashes of light to get my attention. So ...how do I hear His voice? God does not always guide and direct by supernatural means. God provides us with His Word, the gift of prayer, a family, friends, a church community and much more to help us when we don’t know what to do or where to turn. It is not unusual to have others act on God’s behalf.

We also need to remember that God, as the Holy Spirit, dwells in our own heart. God has given us eyes to see, a heart to feel, and a burden for things we should do. Direction can come from deep within our spiritual being. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, would remind us to use scripture, reason, tradition and our own experiences as a way to connect with God and “hear his voice”.

The first part of Psalm 23 says, “the Lord is my shepherd”. It reminds me of our need to build a loving relationship with God and seek his guidance daily. The challenging question I ask myself when reading Psalm 23 is: Am I allowing God to guide me?

The Valley
From the stillness of the Psalm in verse 1 – 3 we make a drastic move into a valley with shadows of death everywhere. Verse 4 says: (NIV Version):

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

Why would David, the writer, want us to leave such a peaceful, restful place with green pastures and still waters? Here, David acknowledges that life sometimes takes us down to dark and desolate places. He calls this place the valley. Have any of you ever felt like you’ve been in a valley? It is likely you feel like you are in a valley today as we all face rising political tension, uncertainty in the future of the United Methodist Church (as we know it) and, of course, the coronavirus outbreak.
In this portion of the Psalm David bears his soul, his concern and his pain to God... “I (David) walk through the valley of the shadow of death”. If we apply this phrase to physical death, as most do, Paul reminds us that the "sting" of death has been removed when Jesus Christ died on the cross for us. Notice though, the verse does not say David is walking through "the valley of death" (as a final resting place) but says he is walking through "the valley of the shadow of death." The phrase is symbolic of a place of gloom or calamity. The valley of the “shadow of death” cannot destroy. That is why David says, "I will fear no evil for you (God) are with me.” In spite of the circumstances in the valley David is reassured by God’s presence knowing that God will guide and protect him though the most difficult of times. As a shepherd, You (God) will, figuratively, carry a rod to fend of predators and staff to gather and guide. The “threat” of being in the dark valley becomes less frightening.

**Sheep in a Rut**
Sheep can sometimes get themselves into all kinds of trouble. One of the common problem’s sheep have is wandering from the fold. Occasionally these little creatures go to find greener pastures and a nice comfortable spot to rest. Maybe they find a depression or rut in the ground and just lie down. Nice for a while but when the sheep tries to wiggle its way out it cannot get back on its feet....no matter what. Not a good position for a sheep because, in time, gasses can build up in their abdomen causing circulation problems. The sheep will die unless the shepherd finds it and restores it to good health. Well, we are not sheep but sometimes we can get bogged down by circumstances that seem to overwhelm us. We just can’t find our way out of the “rut” we are in. Yet this Psalm reminds us to keep walking like David did, to keep moving through the valley. We are encouraged not to linger or “pitch a tent and camp there”. Do you know someone who lingers in their unfortunate circumstances? Do you know someone who refuses, or who is not ready, to move on in spite of good advice and caring help? It can be detrimental to their mental, physical and spiritual health. The Psalms reminds is that it is OK to ask for help from God and others. It is OK to ask for counseling. It is OK to simplify your life so you can make it through difficult times. Be reassured God is with you. This is the hope of Psalm 23. So the question to ponder in times of trouble is: Am I walking through the valley?

**A Generous Loving Host**
David does not leave us in the valley, thank goodness. As we put ourselves back into the Psalms and read verse 4 and 5, we find we are not sheep anymore. It reads:

“You (God) prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen”

God is now a gracious host preparing a banquet for David. We can now imagine ourselves as a guest at the table of our Lord. In ancient times, hospitality involved more than merely providing a meal for the guests. The host strives to provide a feast above and beyond what is needed to sustain his visitors. God anoints David’s head with oil, David’s cup overflows. It is a meal of open-hearted, over-flowing generosity with blessings beyond measure. Hospitality, at this time, also encompassed the obligation to protect those who are now in the home. As guests of the Lord, David could dine safely even in the presence of his enemies. What a wonderful place to be.

Our God is generous beyond measure, protecting and guiding us through life....no matter what the circumstances are. This is a relationship built on love. The 23rd Psalm ends on the beautiful note of everlasting love. We find comforting and reassuring words from David as he says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

So, the last question for the day to is: Am I remembering God loves me?
Conclusion
Three simple questions:

Am I allowing God to guide me?
Am I walking through the valley?
Am I remembering God loves me?

Three questions – but I think they are what we need to ask ourselves - especially now. Amen.

Let us pray:
God of all creation, thank You for grounding us with the confidence of Psalm 23 which gives us rest, guides us through difficult times and reminds us of Your loving presence. We offer You our very best intentions to follow You at all times. We are grateful for Your love and forgiving heart when we falter and fall short. Thank You for being at our side in all circumstances and at all times. Help us to recognize all the blessing You have given to us, our family and our friends. We ask all this in the name of Your Son, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Benediction
May God the Father prepare the way forward. May Jesus the Son guide your footsteps, and may the Holy Spirit watch over you on every path that you take. Amen.

For reflection: A Prayer by Thomas Merton from “Thoughts in Solitude”
My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen