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EASTER 4C

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A short act of worship and daily devotions

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Call to worship

God who is both good shepherd and almighty Creator,
God who is Father and Mother,
God who is Spirit and Christ,
Three in one,
I bring myself to meet with you in worship this day.
Show me how to walk in your way.

Amen.¹

Opening Prayers

Lord, you are the good shepherd,
Caring for your flock with an abundance of love.

Today, I thank you for your tenderness;
For providing rest when needed,
Strength when called upon,
Resilience when pressed,
Compassion when moved,
Constant companionship whilst I navigate life,
Encouragement when disappointments arrive,
Direction when I stumble,
Hope when I despair,
Joy after grief,
Forgiveness and redemption.

You are the good shepherd,
Bringing your flock to safety.
Bringing me into relationship with you.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of our lives.

I press on with the hope of eternity with you.

Amen.²

You may now wish to say the Lord's prayer in whatever language or version you are most comfortable.

Hymn:

548 STF – Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine - [YouTube](#)

¹ Call to Worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Sheila Matthews

Readings: Psalm 23 – [Click for reading](#)
John 10:22-30 – [Click for reading](#)

Response to the reading

You may wish to reflect on these words from Carolyn Ryder, the Team Leader at Touchstone interfaith centre in Bradford.

Last week, I was delighted to spend an-almost-balmy afternoon on the top of Ilkley Moor at the Cow and Calf Rocks. You may have heard of the rock formation or seen the spectacular views over the Wharfe Valley for yourself. In today's Old Testament reading (arguably one of the most well-known pieces of scriptures), we read about a valley; the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Now I'm pretty sure it wouldn't have looked like the Wharfe Valley as it's located on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and King David, who started out as a humble shepherd, would probably have been familiar with this valley during various stages of his life.

This all got me thinking about the metaphorical valleys we travel through during our lives. The valleys which, especially at the time, may be viewed as the difficult seasons. The times when our lives become over-shadowed by despair, defeat, or discouragement.

For some of us right now, we may feel as if we are right at the bottom of a particularly long valley; it is frightening and lonely being in the thick of it. Or perhaps you're coming out of a valley and sense a glimmer of light and some relief. For others, you may be supporting someone close to you who is going through a valley-time and you find yourself in the role of the light-bearer as you try as you hold out the candle of hope.

As I reflected on these seasons in my own life and others, I was firstly reminded that valleys don't discriminate on grounds of age, race, sex, gender, disability or sexual orientation for example. At some stage in all our lives, probably more than once, we will encounter personal or collective valleys. Just like mountaintop experiences, valleys are part of life. As Jesus himself said; 'In this life you will have trials and tribulation'. The Psalmist also reminds us, "The good do not escape all troubles—they have them too.....'. But, and there is a big BUT here; "But the Lord helps him in each and every one". And this is the second reminder.

The Good News is you and I don't have to rely on escapism, denial or wishful thinking in such times. The Good News, and especially when we find ourselves in the valley, is we are not alone; the Good Shepherd is with us and in trust and faith, we are called to listen to His voice and follow Him (John 10:27-28).

When I am with my nieces in the park, we often try and 'catch' one another's shadows by trying to jump on them. But the minute you look back in the direction of the sun – to the light – you lose the shadow and their outlines 'magically' disappear. It might be obvious to point out, but we can't have a shadow without light.

When we are in the Valley of the Shadow it may feel dark and hopeless. However, the fact there are shadows, reminds us that God, in Jesus the Light of the World, is with us. And therefore, one of the keys to overcoming our fears and stepping out of

the shadows is to keep looking towards Him. As we keep our eyes on the light and keep following His call, the shadows begin to fade.

So, I want to suggest that in the midst of our fears and worries, we need to be intentional as to who we are following and what we are listening out for. If we keep focusing on our fears and worries, or on comparing ourselves to other people who are 'managing better than us', we are probably going to feel worse rather than better. In fact, our fears will probably magnify like the fear children have of monsters under the bed.

Therefore, I want to suggest in the words of the Jesuit theologian Walter Burghardt, we need to take time to pause, to rest in God's presence and take a 'long, loving look at the real'. This is not to say that some of our concerns, worries and fears are not real. I love how God knows we are human and fear is a human response. Why else would God, when addressing his prophets or sending angels to shepherds at the birth of Jesus or to women at the empty tomb, begin by saying 'Don't be afraid!'?

However, as Christ's disciples, we can find ways to look at those obstacles and fears clearly by bringing them in to the open, perhaps with a trusted friend or safe person. We can bring them in to the light in prayer by being about our fears and concerns and in confidence knowing the Good Shepherd doesn't condemn us but hears us, cares for us and refills us.

And finally, when we remember how God takes 'a long, loving look' at us, we can find safety, comfort and courage to face the path ahead. For God is faithful; both on the mountain tops and in our valleys. Amen.

You may now wish to pause, and have some time of quiet reflection, where you can ponder these questions:

- How can you be reminded of God's goodness when you walk through the valley or when supporting someone else who is going through a valley season?
- In what ways can you keep focused and attentive to the voice of the Good Shepherd?³

Hymn:

297 STF – Christ is alive! Let Christians sing OR

255 STF – The kingdom of God is justice and joy

³ Reflection written by Caroline Ryder

Blessing

May you go out in peace,
Seeking your kingdom of justice and joy,
Praying for a better world
And playing your part in bringing it about.
Amen.⁴

Prayers and Prayer Pointers for the Week

Monday 9th May

- On this day in 1974, the US judiciary opened a formal impeachment hearing against President Richard Nixon, amidst the Watergate scandal.
- Today, we pray for all in leadership: that they might resist the temptations of worldly power, and seek to use their positions and power to suit those they serve, rather than selfish ambitions. Pray for wisdom, and for grace.

Tuesday 10th May

- Today, go looking for resurrections
The divine corrections
To the misconceptions
That God is dead or somehow uninterested.
Notice the new life
Emerging from amongst strife
And see that the world is rife
With everyday glimpses of glory.

Wednesday 11th May

- The German theologian Meister Eckhart once said, 'if the only prayer you ever say in your life is "thank you", that will be enough'.
- Today, throughout the day (or whatever is left of the day), simply look for opportunities to pray the words 'thank you' to God.
- Thank you for the sunrise. Thank you for that I have enough food for the day. Thank you for my health, such as it is. Thank you for that lovely conversation with a friend. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.
- Amen.

Thursday 12th May

- Gracious God, show me how to love without borders or restrictions, how to radically live out your calling on my life and your challenge to all of us to live in the way of love.
- Show me how to be the kind of shepherd who would always go in search of the one most in need, how to reach out to the lost sheep in my life and community.
- Show me how to love as you love, O Christ.

⁴ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

Friday 13th May

- According to her book, Revelations of Divine Love, today is the day that Julian of Norwich had visions of Jesus (whilst suffering for a life-threatening illness, from which she later miraculously recovered). The book might be the first book in the English language written by a woman and she describes seeing the shining image of Christ in sixteen different positions, ending with his resurrection and a reminder that Christ still dwells in the souls of those who love him.
- Today, as you pray, as you live your life, be reminded of that reassurance – Christ lives in you. Yes, even you.

Saturday 14th May

Gracious God, I know you have plans for me- plans for me to be a part of your kingdom and an agent of love in the world. Today, show me how to respond to the invitations I might receive.

Help me to be open to the opportunities to share your love.

In Jesus' name I pray,

Amen.