

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2024
“THE IDENTITY CRISIS WORKSHOP”
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 23
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Psalm 23 (NKJV)

The LORD *is* my shepherd;
I shall not [a]want.

2 He makes me to lie down in [b]green pastures;
He leads me beside the [c]still waters.

3 He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name’s sake.

4 Yea, 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.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will [d]dwell in the house of the LORD
[e]Forever.

Sermon: The Identity Crisis Workshop

Today we’re going to play a game that I use in workshops to teach people about refugees, homeless people, and other populations that have experienced trauma and displacement. If you attended Na Anela last January, you may recall doing it once before.

You’ll find that I’ve left pieces of note paper and pencils in the pews. I want you to take that piece of paper and write on it 5 things that make you “you”. These can be personality traits like kind, funny, smart; they can be activities you’re engaged in, like crochet, soccer, church; you can list familial ties like your identity as a father, or a grandmother, or a friend; they can be where you went to school or worked, like Iolani, the Navy, et cetera; they can be cultural

markers like Hawaiian, Japanese, American. Take 5 minutes to think about yourself and “who you are” and write down the words that come to mind.

Now I want us to come back together. You don’t have to say it aloud, but did anyone write a personality trait? If so, please cross that off your list.

Imagine that you are a refugee fleeing your country because armed militias came through your village burning down the houses of Christians. You used to be funny, kind, and patient, but now you’re on a boat in the Mediterranean overpacked with 500 other people in a storm and you’ve lost your ability to laugh. You aren’t kind or patient because you have to do what’s necessary to survive, including being mean and ruthless toward your fellow passengers.

If you have a positive personality trait listed on your identity list, you no longer get that piece of yourself anymore in this scenario. It’s gone.

Ok – now did anyone write an activity like sports, crafting, or volunteerism?

If you wrote anything related to activities, please cross those identity markers off your list. Imagine you just lost your job the same week that your spouse was diagnosed with an expensive illness. You can’t afford your mortgage anymore, let alone the fees or materials to stay in your knitting club. You’re busy trying to find money to survive this season, and you don’t have time anymore for your weekly Bible study. You can’t even afford the gas money to get to your grandchild’s soccer tournament in Kapolei. Soon, you find yourself homeless after enough failed mortgage payments – and at this point, you can’t even remember what activities you liked anyway because the whole world feels dark and brutal.

If you have a recreational or enrichment activity listed on your identity marker list, you no longer get that piece of yourself anymore. It’s gone.

Did anyone list a job or school they’re associated with? Or a military branch? Guess what.

Imagine you were a combat soldier in Afghanistan. You saw unspeakable acts of brutality in the war and it’s permanently altered your ability to function. You’re suffering undiagnosed PTSD, and you find yourself lashing out at your family, drinking at work, being insubordinate to your ranking officers when you return home. You are dishonorably discharged from service, and find yourself homeless without the VA to lean on for veteran’s benefits because of your dysfunctional behavior.

Or imagine you’re a graduate of Punahou and you’re so proud of your Alma Mater. Unfortunately, Hawaii has been sunk into a civil war and Punahou is bombed and burned to the ground.

Or imagine that you're laid off from your job because of this hypothetical civil war that has caused the economy to collapse.

You're living in a FEMA tent with thousands of other refugees, with no job, no school, your entire history wiped out.

If you wrote cultural identity down, that also gets taken off – the war that tore Hawaii apart took you away from your culture, and you find yourself in a foreign land needing to assimilate and bury the pieces of yourself that you were raised with. Worse yet, you're afraid of telling people in your new foreign country that you're from Hawaii because people will judge you for the atrocities that happened there during the war.

If you have a job, military branch, school, or culture, you can cross those off your list.

Finally, if you wrote family, you can go ahead and cross those off, too. Your kids and grandkids died in the bombing of Hawaii during the civil war. Or, in a different scenario, your family cut you off and no longer retains contact with you because your PTSD symptoms have resulted in you having a violent drinking problem that they can't tolerate around their families.

If you have familial identity on your list, you no longer get that piece of yourself anymore. It's gone.

By now, I imagine your list of "who you are" is almost entirely crossed out. You're just a shell of the person you once were.

But one final thing - Did anyone happen to write "faith," "God," or "Jesus" on their list?

If you did, you can keep that one. For the Psalmist says,

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You *are* with me." (23:4)

Now, what was the point of this exercise? Why do I use it to talk to groups about the experience of trauma and displacement? You may be thinking – oh, that would never happen to me! Hawaii's not in a civil war. I don't have a mortgage anymore, so it's not like I would lose my house if I lost my job. Or, I don't have a violent drinking problem that alienates me from my family.

No one is born in this world foreseeing these outcomes of trauma and suffering in their lives. No child aspires to grow up to be a drug addict. No veteran goes into service hoping to live out realistic waking nightmares for the rest of their lives. Yes – these instances of identity stripping through pain can truly happen to any one of us.

I use this exercise to help folks understand that people who have experienced trauma have had their whole lives stripped away and are operating from a base lack of identity, which is a very painful place to be.

Yet, the Psalmist says here in chapter 23, and almost consistently across the Psalms, that the world can take away all the pieces of our identity but it can never take away God. God will always be with us no matter what we lose. When we walk through the darkest valleys—when life strips away all the pieces that once defined us—God remains steadfast. And not only is God with us, but God is actively rebuilding us, shaping us anew, restoring what was broken.

Let's look at the promises laid out in Psalm 23. It doesn't just speak of God's presence in the valley; it declares the rebuilding work of our Shepherd:

"He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." (23:2)

This isn't just about rest; it's about restoration. God doesn't leave us in a fragmented state. God meets us in our brokenness and begins to knit us back together, renewing our souls when everything else has been lost.

"He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." (23:3)

When we feel directionless, when our lives have been completely uprooted, God guides us onto a new path. He gives us a purpose greater than ourselves—a path that reflects His goodness, even when we feel unworthy or uncertain.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." (23:5)

This is a picture of abundance, of honor, of being set apart. Even when we face adversaries or trials that threaten to destroy us, God says, "You are still mine. You are still worthy." God doesn't just rebuild us partially; He restores us to a place of honor and abundance.

The psalmist ends with a bold declaration:

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (23:6)

Goodness and mercy are not just temporary companions—they follow us, they pursue us, they rebuild us all our lives. And when all is said and done, when the world has stripped away every temporal piece of our identity, we find that our truest identity is eternal: a child of God, destined to dwell with Him forever.

So what does this mean for us today?

First, it means that no matter what life takes from you, God's presence is unshakable. He's not just *with* you—He's working *for* you. He's restoring, guiding, and preparing something beautiful, even in the middle of your pain.

Second, it means we need courage. Courage to trust God in the valley. Courage to believe that even when everything is stripped away, God can make us whole again. The rebuilding may not look like the life we once had, but it will be a life filled with His goodness and mercy.

Finally, it means we must extend this hope to others. There are people all around us—our neighbors, our coworkers, the person sitting in the seat next to you—who may be walking through their own valleys, feeling like everything that made them “them” has been stripped away. God calls us to be instruments of His restoration, to walk alongside them, to remind them that they are never alone.

I bring this workshop with me to churches, non profits, and youth groups to help people not only understand their own brokenness, but to understand how to help others who have experienced acute trauma and pain. Our whole lives can be stripped away, but if we encourage ourselves and others to walk with God toward that promised restoration, there is nothing this world can tear down that He cannot rebuild stronger.

Take your list home today. Look at the words you crossed off, and think about what those losses would mean for you. But then, look at what remains. “Faith. God. Jesus.” Let that be your foundation. And let Psalm 23 be a constant reminder that no matter how deep the valley, no matter how dark the shadow, our Shepherd is with us—and He is rebuilding us with courage, love, and hope.

Amen.