

Sermon for June 12, 2016 – “Through the Valley”

11th Sunday of OT, Year C – Texts: Psalm 23; John 10:7-18

The 23rd Psalm is probably the best known, most loved, most quoted passage of Scripture. It's so familiar that people who rarely ever pick up a Bible, or go to church, can often still quote at least part of this Psalm. The one problem with the Psalm is that it's very often requested at death-beds and funerals, so much so that we tend to associate the 23rd Psalm with death and dying. But I believe that the Psalm is really for the living. I think that's who it was intended to speak to and for whom it holds the most comfort; those who are fully alive in the truest sense of the word.

Some of you may have heard of Roy Campanella. He was a baseball player with the Brooklyn Dodgers, before a bad accident in 1958 left him paralyzed from the shoulders down. In his autobiography he talks about the many nights he cried himself to sleep, about the pain that racked his body and his sinking into deep depression. He wrote: “All my life whenever I was in trouble, I had turned to God for help”. “I remembered my Bible and asked the nurse to get the one from the drawer in the night table”. “I opened it to the 23rd Psalm: ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.’” “From that moment on, I was on my way back”. “I knew I was going to make it!” As it turned out, he did! Given strength by the Psalm, he endured years of physical therapy, and though he required a wheelchair for mobility for the remainder of his life Campanella was eventually able to regain substantial use of his arms and hands. He was able to feed himself, shake hands, and gesture while speaking. There are hundreds and thousands of testimonies like this. Stories of how persons have found in this simple Psalm the comfort, strength, and the assurance that they are going to make it! I'm sure many of you can tell your own stories about what this psalm has meant to you, how it has gotten you through difficult times reminding us of God's providence and protection.

What I'd like to do this morning is to take a closer look at the psalm this morning in relation to our gospel reading, where Jesus speaks of Himself as the Good Shepherd, and focusing mainly on one verse of the Psalm, verse four: **“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 Thy staff they comfort me.”** It turns out that the Valley of the Shadow of Death is a real place. Most scholars believe that it's a mountain pass in Israel. There's some disagreement whether it's the Hinnom Valley, which Jesus refers to as Gehenna and which Christians have come to believe is symbolic for hell (which would make sense), or whether it's the last section of the road from Jericho that leads to Jerusalem and to which Jesus refers in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In either case, it was a pass that enabled the shepherds to lead their sheep from one mountain pasture to another. And it got its name from shepherds because of its steep sides and sheer rock walls. In these steep cliffs were numerous caves and rocks and crevices all of which were perfect hiding places for animals of prey, and for robbers who would prey on passing travelers. The steep cliffs also caused sounds to echo and amplify in the valley which made the valley a terrifying place for both skittish, defenseless sheep **and** shepherd alike. So taking a look at the Psalm, we hear: **“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...”** – which is all very well, but **now** the sheep are in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and it's a pretty scary place.

An immediate question is, how did they get there? Now, as you may already know, sheep aren't the most intelligent creatures, so it may well be that they just sort of wandered in there on their own. But, sheep tend not to be independent thinkers, they tend to follow, so it's probably safe to assume that the shepherd led them there. That makes sense, right? And if the image in the psalm is as clear to us as I think it is, don't we identify the shepherd here as Jesus, the Good Shepherd? I mean, isn't that what Jesus calls Himself in the gospel reading?

Okay, so we've got Jesus as the shepherd. Which, by process of elimination, pretty much means that we're the sheep, right? If all this is the case, then what are we doing in the valley of the shadow of death? What kind of a shepherd leads his flock into a place like that?? Especially one who calls Himself the "Good Shepherd?" What's so "good" about leading your flock into a place where they (and you) are easy prey? Good questions, but we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. The question before us now is this: What exactly are we talking about when we talk about the valley? Just what is the Valley of the Shadow of Death? Actually, I think that's fairly obvious as well, but I'm also thinking that it's not so much a **place** as it is a state of **being**. All those terrifying, lonely, frightening times in life, those times of sickness, tragedy, emotional stress, tension, fear, pain, economic disaster, loneliness, those deep, dark times when God may seem far away. Which is ironic, because the literal translation of the original Hebrew is "valley of deep darkness..." And when we circle back to the question about what kind of a shepherd leads his flock into that valley things start to become a little clearer. We begin to suspect that maybe the shepherd has a purpose.

You see, the shepherd essentially has two main jobs; One, to protect the sheep, the other is to help the sheep find food, so that they can graze. Now, would it surprise you to learn that there are several different types of grazing? According to my research there are nine that fall into two categories. The first is continuous grazing and it uses a one-pasture system in which sheep have unrestricted access to the pasture area throughout the grazing season. It's a simple system to implement and manage with minimal capital investment and movement of the sheep. The problem here is that the sheep eventually run out of food. And so, over time, it's been determined that the second type, known as controlled grazing, is far better for the sheep. Simple rotational grazing, in use in Jesus' time, is a system in which more than one pasture area is used and sheep are moved to different pasture during the grazing season, from pastures that are eaten up and barren to newer, lusher, green meadows. Now, to get there, both shepherd and sheep must travel, and not always on well-paved roads offering safe passage so having to go through the valley of the shadow of darkness is pretty much inevitable. And see, the sheep don't understand this. All that the sheep know is that they're in a pretty scary place but the shepherd knows what he's doing, and the sheep, over time, have learned to **trust** the shepherd. They have developed faith in the shepherd and they've done so because the shepherd has proven trustworthy. Are we beginning to see where this is going?

Jesus said: "**My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me**". Indeed, we (the sheep) know and have learned to trust the Good Shepherd. Jesus has proven Himself more than trustworthy. We know, as our gospel reading reminds us, that He has given us eternal life, and we will never perish, that no one will snatch us out of His hand.

And so the sheep follow the shepherd, even through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, “fearing no evil.” And so it is the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ, is the one who leads us through troubled and difficult times of life. But I want to be clear about something here, and I want to circle back to the earlier question about the kind of a shepherd that leads his flock into a place like the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I want to be very clear when I say that I’m not suggesting that Jesus deliberately leads us into the rough patches of life, nor am I saying that the troubling or difficult times of our lives are in any way, shape, or form **caused** by God or that we are somehow being tested by God – not at all!!! It’s kind of clichéd to say this but stuff happens in life. Things happen, as I’ve said before, by choice, chance or circumstance or some combination thereof. And if we understand ourselves as the sheep here, understanding that sheep aren’t all that intelligent and left to their own devices are prone to make bad choices, then it follows logically to say that we are going to eventually find ourselves in difficult times. Even as people of faith aren’t we prone to wander off the path that God has set for us? Aren’t we susceptible to follow those who are not the shepherd; the “hired hands” who are merely thieves and bandits trying to take advantage of us when we’re at our most vulnerable? The ones who runs away the moment things start to go south?

The truth is that things do happen in life. Eventually, we all experience the dark and difficult times. I’m sure most of us have at one time or another, but not necessarily for some clearly definable reason. And sometimes, unfortunately, there simply are no answers, certainly no **easy** answers. As I said earlier, sometimes, in finding new pastures, we must travel... not always on well-paved roads offering safe passage, and sometimes we lose our way. In any case, it seems to me that going through the valley of the shadow of darkness is pretty much inevitable. Sometimes this is incomprehensible to us. All we know is that we’re in a pretty scary place so in those times, maybe it’s not about how we got there or what kind of shepherd leads his flock there. Maybe it’s enough to know, and be grateful, that we have a shepherd who stays with us, a shepherd who will not run when the wolves come, a shepherd who is able to lead us through the valley, a shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. So, yes, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the difficulties we all go through, the grief and pain we all encounter, all of that is just something we all have to go through. It’s an inevitable part of the privilege (yep, privilege) of being human. And isn’t true, as Rick Warren has pointed out, that God is less concerned about our **comfort** than with our **character**?

At the same time, trust especially in the darkest, most difficult times in life is often hard to come by. Even, as I alluded to earlier, those called by God. Think of the ancient Israelites and the story of the Exodus, travelling from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land, through the desert, through the Red Sea. God protected them every step of the way. He provided manna and quail from the sky and water from a rock. But they still complained and could not fully put their trust in God so a trip that should’ve taken **11 days** ended up taking **40 years**.

There are lessons to be learned here. The first one’s the most obvious, we must learn to **trust** in God to lead us on the path, “Paths of righteousness,” if you will. But, even beyond that, is the second more important lesson and it’s that our God is trustworthy and is always with us. Jesus Christ is living proof of that.

In Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, we know that we're not alone as we travel through the Valley. And could we have a better guide than one who's been there before? Someone who's been there alone, someone who's looked death in the face and has returned to help us as we take that same journey? He leads us through it walking ahead of us, not simply because He knows the way but because He **is** the way. He calls us to follow. He calls us to trust in Him even when we cannot always see His plan or purpose. To realize that His purpose isn't just to lead us through the valley but to get us to the promised land of milk and honey, a land of green pastures and still waters. A land where tables are set before us. The valley is not the destination, but it's the only way there in life or in death.

One final point to make here...And it is that we need to realize is that there is a world of difference between death and the **shadow** of death. The shadow may be frightening, dark, and cold, but they're just that – shadows – not the real thing. And while we're on the subject what, exactly, is death? Well, death, **real** death, is separation from God. But there's good news...Good news in the form of Paul's reminder that nothing, not even death, **“will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** Good news of eternal life, words spoken by Christ Himself to Martha as she mourned the death of her brother Lazarus. **“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die, yet shall they live...and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.”** This is the promise that we Christians have every day of our lives. But, and here's the thing, there will be those times when it's sure going to feel like it, there will be times when we feel separated from God. There will be times when we might feel alone – forsaken by God. There will be those times when we will find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death wondering why God has led us here only to abandon us. Just as Jesus did on the cross, crying out: **“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me!”** But such was Jesus' faith that just moments later He commended His spirit to His Father. He placed it in God's hands as He walked through that lonesome valley all alone. And as Jesus' faith was vindicated on Easter. So will ours be when we place our lives in Jesus' hands! That is a promise on which we can stand. You see, we live in the knowledge and reality that Christ is risen. We live in the understanding, as I said on Easter, that “the wounds of Christ are his credentials to the suffering race of humanity.” They are our signs that God knows. They are our reminder that God keeps his promises. The promises of life **abundant** in this world, **eternal** in the next. The promise that we Christians don't die that we are simply called from one life to another, from one pasture to another. Pastures lush and green, with calm, still waters where our souls will be restored, where a table is being set for us and our cups overflow.

I read somewhere that the point of walking with God is to keep going. And so we do. In many respects, it's what we **must** do. It's made easier by the knowledge that Jesus, like a shepherd, leads us and the familiar voice we hear, falling on our ear, is His voice encouraging us to fear no evil, reminding us that He is with us leading us on paths of righteousness for His name's sake, assuring us that goodness and mercy shall follow us and that we will dwell in the house of the Lord, in the room that He has prepared for us, **forever**.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.