

October 23, 2016

Psalm 23

**“Even when I walk through the dark valley**

**I fear no danger because you are with me.**

**Your rod and your staff – they protect me.”**

God Is Holding Your Life (Surely Goodness and Mercy)

The Rev. Lynn P. Lampman

How many of us remember the series “Gunsmoke”?  
*(Wait for a show of hands from the congregation)*

In one episode an outlaw was traveling on a train  
disguised as a minister.

On that same train,

Doc Adams from Dodge City

is caring for a dying man.

The conductor seeks to bring comfort  
to the dying man by getting the minister.

Doc Adams suspected the minister’s true identity  
but for the sake the of dying man  
went along with it.

When the fake cleric reached the bedside,  
the injured man whispered, “The Twenty-third”.

Doc Adams prompted, he wants you read  
the Twenty-third Psalm!”

The imposter fumbled through the Bible  
he carried as part of his disguise  
until at last he located the Psalm.

He read the words awkwardly,  
as though for the first time.

Even given the circumstances,  
the dying man was calmed.

This text soothed him as he passed into  
the shadow of death’s dark valley.

This scene illustrates the power of scripture to move, comfort and guide the human heart in the extreme circumstances of life.

Let's get right to it ,shall we!

Notice that in the first three verses of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm

David refers to God in the third person:

“The Lord is my Shepherd.

He makes me lie down...

He leads me...

He restores my soul.”

Then, in verses 4 and 5 David the writer,

Shifts, referring to God now in the second person:

“I will fear no evil,

for You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff,

They protect me.

You prepare a table (from Shepherd, to now Host)

before me...

You anoint my head with oil.”

Why does David switch from talking about God with “He”

to talking to God with “You”

and why does it happen in verse 4?

Why didn't he just go on to say,

‘Even though I walk through

the death valley

I will fear no evil, for He is with me;

His rod and His staff,

they protect me.

Could it be that to change from

third person – he/she

to the second person – you,

is more intimate.

Why because he felt the shadow closing in  
and he was in crisis.

And in those times,

Does not something deep happen  
between ourselves as God?

I think for David, the answer was  
a resounding 'Yes!'.

You've noticed it too, haven't you?

we're more prone to talk about God  
when we are in the green pastures.

We are more prone to talk to God  
when we are in the dangerous ravine.

In the brilliant sunlight, we are prone to wander off  
in pursuit of greener grass.

But in the dark,  
we hug God's knee.

David changes from comments about God  
to communion with God

because during his valley time,  
he stayed ever close to the Shepherd  
and the Host.

He experienced God in a way that had  
ushered him into greater intimacy with God.

What is going on that the sheep get into a dark valley?

The path through the valley, the Psalm tells us

Is also one of the paths of righteousness  
in which God leads.

"God guides me in the paths of righteousness  
for God's name sake."

Why lead a lamb into a valley filled with  
danger and death threats.

There's only one possible answer,  
"To get to some better place!"

Now, let's zoom in on the dark valley,  
for the "Valley of the Shadow of Death"  
is an actual place.  
It lies between Jerusalem and Jericho.  
We start our journey in Jerusalem –  
the home of the Temple,  
where you find the presence of God.  
Then, we walk through the dark valley  
to get to Jericho,  
which is lush and green  
because of the springs that reside there.  
In other words, you go through the dark valley,  
so you can get to some better place – your Jericho!

Sometimes, when you are in the midst of the valley  
the reasons for being there are not apparent.  
But, rest assured  
God is taking you to the high country,  
where the sun is warm and the grass is lush.

For every valley is a pathway to something better.  
In Psalm 84:11 we read,  
"No good does the Lord withhold from those  
who walk uprightly."  
And, "We know that for those who love God  
all things work together for good,  
for those who are called according to God's purpose."  
(Romans 8:28).  
The valley isn't good,  
But the Shepherd/Host is!  
For God knows the way.

What predicaments and precarious situations  
we find ourselves in, right!  
Yet, they carry so much potential.  
if we are able to overcome our fear  
which, if not addressed, and managed  
stops us in our tracks.

This Psalm tells us how David did it  
and how we can do it too.

First, David speaks of God's nearness, God's presence.  
When each of us step into the valley,  
and we will have to step you know, some day,  
maybe even today –  
It's dark, and we can't even see the path ahead,  
And there are the possibility of predators and enemies  
laying in wait for you and me,  
Yet, our Shepherd wants us to hear, like David heard,  
"I will be with you."

Kenneth Wilson tells of growing up in Pittsburgh,  
where he and his family lived in an old rundown house.  
Every night, being the youngest,  
he had to be the first to go upstairs to the  
dark, drafty and creaking third floor,  
It was a scary place.

He recounts, once his father said to him,  
"Would you rather I leave the light on  
and go downstairs,  
or turn the light out  
and stay with you?  
He says, he chose presence with darkness  
over absence with light.  
Isn't this not what we really want in our valleys –

the assurance that Someone is there?  
(Kenneth L. Wilson, Have Faith Without Fear)

Yet, David also helps us a bit more  
by telling us we also need to remember  
and avail ourselves of  
God's provisions.

A shepherd's rod was a two-foot club made of oak,  
with a rounded head that was whittled from the knot  
from the tree and had sharp bits of metal  
pounded into it.

This club was used to defend  
the flock against attacks.  
It was the Shepherds' power  
wielded against the sheep's enemies.

David said he had no fear in adversity and danger  
because of the comfort of God's power,  
protecting him from that which would ruin him.

And we need not fear either,  
"for greater is God that is in you,  
than he that is in the world." (1 John 4:4)

From the rod, now to the staff.  
David says, God's staff comforts him.  
He is referring to the shepherd's crook,  
with its hook on one end.  
The good shepherd uses it to guide the sheep,  
lest they stray away.  
Just a gentle tap of the staff on the lamb's side  
would move them back into the fold.  
And the crook would also gather up a sheep  
from a place where it had fallen.

David felt comforted that his Shepherd/Host,  
was guarding his steps,  
making sure that he makes it through  
the darkness safely.

And lastly, David was not just supremely confident,  
about his present circumstances  
but of the grace and loving kindness of God  
in the future.

David believed valley times were appointed for his good.  
For he learned things about God that could be learned  
no other way, but in the deep and dark ravines of life.

David stayed close to God, trusting in God's presence  
and in the provisions God provided –  
those of protection and guidance all the way.

May we do the same.

(I am indebted to Lloyd Stilley is pastor of First Baptist  
Church, Gulf Shores, Alabama for sections of this sermon  
which came from a sermon he preached on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm)