

You Don't Have to Go Through It Alone

Psalms for the Summer – Psalm 23

August 4, 2024

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When I do funeral planning with a family, I have a list of scripture passages for them to consider. The passage that gets picked most often is Psalm 23. People find it comforting. It's a personal confession of faith in the God who cares for us. The psalmist affirms his faith without reservation: "The Lord is my shepherd"; "thou art with me"; "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

This psalm doesn't only get used at funerals, of course. There are plenty of difficult times when we need the comfort and care of the Shepherd. In my congregation in Bloomington, there was a young girl named Kristi who was born with a bad heart. In fact, she had 6 heart defects that needed plenty of attention along the way. When Kristi reached her teenage years, things got noticeably worse. She was put on a transplant list. One day, while at Children's Hospital in the Twin Cities, a call came that a heart was available. How soon could Kristi and her mother, Judy, get to St. Louis? Dad would stay home with the other two children.

An hour later, I joined Kristi and Judy at Children's to provide some emotional support and prayer. I remember reading the Twenty-third Psalm to them, using a more contemporary version than the King James. We were holding hands. I came to the verse, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me." Almost in unison, they squeezed my hand. They had heard the promise. They would not be going through this operation alone. Sure enough, the operation went well, and three weeks later they were back in Bloomington, and Kristi had a brand new heart.

Sometimes Psalm 23 provides assurance in a life-threatening situation for an individual and family. But at other times the assurance extends much further. Most all of us can remember the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and where we were when we first heard the news. I had dropped off my kids at school and was on my way to church when a news flash came over the radio. An airplane had crashed into the Twin Towers in New York City. Next-door neighbors were members of the church and they motioned for me to watch the events on their television. Along with the rest of America, I looked on in shock and horror as an additional plane was directed toward the Twin Towers and then another plane toward the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

Before the morning was over, we had planned a worship service at church for later that evening. People were crying and weeping at what they had seen. Then we went home to watch as President George Bush addressed the nation. At the conclusion of a five-minute speech, designed to comfort us, President Bush said, "Tonight I ask for your prayers, especially for the children. In the words of Psalm 23: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.'" The president concluded: "None of us will ever forget this day."

Psalm 23 has the capacity to speak to both an anxious teenage girl and her mother, plus an entire nation. In a time of deep distress, it says: *you do not have to go through this alone.*

There are various metaphors used throughout the Old Testament to express the covenant relationship between God and his people. And one of the most beautiful and meaningful is that of the shepherd and his sheep. The appropriateness of this image is obvious when we remember that Israel was a semi-nomadic people. The patriarchs had flocks and herds, and were often on the move. God called Moses from keeping his flock to become the shepherd who would lead his people out of bondage in Egypt. God chose David, the shepherd-boy, to become the shepherd-king of Israel, and David was described as a man after God's own heart. All the kings of Israel were looked upon as shepherds, and no doubt, some were better than others. And the Messiah-king, for whom they were waiting, was to be the shepherd above all shepherds.

Back to the question during Children's Time, what makes a shepherd good? When the shepherd guides and provides for the sheep. When he leads them to tender green grass, which is often hard to find in the Near East. When he leads them to places of rest. Through rest and life-giving water, he restores the sheep to life.

On top of everything, however, the shepherd is good when he's the protector and keeper of the sheep. The valley of the shadow of death can also be translated as "the dark and dangerous valley." The shepherd often must lead his sheep through deep ravines where wild beasts and robbers may lurk. The presence of the shepherd banishes fear. With his rod the shepherd can ward off an attacker and with his staff he can rescue a sheep that has fallen into a pit.

This image of danger is at the heart of Psalm 23. The writers of the psalms were often careful to highlight their central point. If you were to read this psalm in Hebrew – there are 26 words before the phrase, “you are with me.” And if you read to the end of the psalm there are another 26 words. Clearly the psalmist sees this as his main point. Those three little words in Hebrew – *you are with me* – prove to be a source of comfort and strength in every time of trouble. Those words have spoken to millions of believers down through the ages. They’ve said: “Don’t be afraid, whatever you face in the hours or days or weeks to come, I will be with you. *You don’t have to go through it alone.*”

I’ve mentioned before that a typical element of many of the psalms is an affirmation of trust. In Psalm 23 that element is developed into an entire psalm. The movement of the psalm can be summarized simply by considering the first, middle, and last words: “The Lord...with me...my whole-life long.”

Who knew the preposition “with” could be so important? Then again, the notion of “with-ness” is a powerful theme in the Bible. When the young farmer Gideon was threshing wheat in a wine press to hide it from the Midianites, their archenemies, he was worried about the future. A messenger from the Lord came and said, “I will be *with* you, Gideon.” (Judg. 6:11-16). When the angel Gabriel went to a young woman named Mary, she was told she was going to have a baby. Mary was suddenly anxious – she didn’t even have a husband – but the angel reassured her, “Greetings, favored one. The Lord is *with* you” (Luke 1:26-38). When Paul’s work in Corinth was running into all sorts of opposition, the Lord came to shore up his confidence, “Do not be afraid, Paul, I am *with* you” (Acts 18:5-11).

To this day, we use this same phrase in our worship: “The Lord be with you.” And the congregation responds, “And also with you.” Why do we use it? Because it regularly shows up in the Bible, and because we have more than our share of anxious times too. *Do not be afraid. The Lord is with you. You don’t have to go through whatever it is you’re facing alone.*

Professor Jim Limburg, of Augustana College at the time, tells the story of a time when his young son got his first ten-speed bike. “It was a Saturday afternoon in the springtime,” says Limburg, “a perfect day for a bike ride. Our son was 11 or 12 at the time. We decided to go for a ride, just the two of us. We followed a bike path to the edge of the city. Then we noticed a drainage tunnel, going under I-229, which circles Sioux Falls. We parked our bikes and walked over to explore the tunnel. It was just high enough for me to walk

through, if I stooped over. So, we started to go through it. Suddenly the tunnel took a turn and it was pitch black.

“We kept going. Then I felt a hand reach out and grab mine. Neither of us said anything about it, but we continued, hand in hand, until we came to another sharp turn, and we could see the light. Then the hand let go.”

Psalm 23, thought Limburg. It’s a psalm for those times when the path of life takes a sharp turn and leads through the darkness. There’s no hint that we can avoid the dark valley by taking a detour around it. The path will have to be traveled. But we have a promise that we will never have to go through the darkness alone. Like a good shepherd who cares for the sheep, like a loving parent who holds the hand of a child, the Lord promises to be with us on the way through the darkness. *We don’t have to go through it alone.*

There’s that promise again, from the Good Shepherd who in Psalm 23 is also the Good Host. He spreads a table before us and invites us to join him. The psalmist responds in gratitude: “Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Friends, before we go to the table this morning, we will share a greeting, “The peace of Christ be with you always.” And the congregation will respond, “And also with you.” That means, you see, that whatever darkness we have to go through, *we don’t ever have to go through it alone.* Amen.