

4.26.2020 Second Sunday After Easter (Psalm 23)  
Do you know the Shepherd?

There's a story that's often been told of a traveling actor who was scheduled to perform in a small mid-western town in the late 1800's. On the night of the performance the town hall was packed, and the audience continually rose to their feet as the actor recited passages from great plays, poems, and literature. When the show was over, the crowd shouted for more and the actor agreed to take a few requests. It was at this point that an old man stood up and asked the skilled actor if he would recite the 23rd Psalm. The actor agreed, but only on the condition that when he was finished, the old man would recite it also. The man agreed and sat back down to listen to the performance.

In a beautiful, trained voice that resonated throughout the town hall the actor began, "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...*" When he was finished, there was thunderous applause and yet another standing ovation. The actor then looked at the old man and said, "All right, it's your turn." So, in a trembling voice that was weakened with age, the man began to speak, and as he did his face took on a joyful glow and love seemed to leap from his mouth with every word. When he concluded, there was no thunderous applause, no standing ovation, and not a dry eye in the house. The silence was finally broken when the actor stepped forward and said to the crowd, "Now you know why I wanted him to follow me. It's just as I thought, I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."

My brothers and sisters in Christ: Do you know the Psalm, or do you know the Shepherd? Do you just talk about God, or do you speak intimately with God? In this difficult time of sickness and physical separation, many of us are turning to the written Word of God to find peace, comfort, and hope for a better tomorrow, and as we do, so often the words of Scripture will capture our attention with their beauty and the unity in which the entire Bible speaks of God's love, and in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, His plans to "*prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future*" (Jeremiah 29:11). Yet as we read the written Word of God, it's important that we don't become an audience so enthralled by the beauty and power of these words that we forget their purpose. Remember, the reason we have God's written Word is so that we can personally and intimately come to know the

true Word of God, the Shepherd of our souls who was with God in the beginning, who was God in the beginning (John 1:1).

The 23rd Psalm sets us on a course to come to know God personally and intimately, because this psalm is so much more than a beautifully crafted poem. This psalm is a bold profession of faith in the goodness of God, and it's as relevant today as it was when it was written 3,000 years ago. Psalm 23 was written by a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), and because of that fact, because of the intimacy of his relationship with God, David doesn't write abstract thoughts about God, he doesn't share second-hand experience, and in this psalm he never speaks about a group of people by using pronouns like we or us or they. David always speaks in the most personal way by using words like my, me, I, and You. He tells us, "*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. He restoreth my soul...*" David knows the Shepherd intimately, and therefore he can boldly proclaim, "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...*" God is with me.

While nobody knows for sure, many scholars believe it was in such a valley that David penned the words of this psalm. Some scholars suggest that David wrote these words while hiding in a cave, fearing for his life, because King Saul was out to kill him, while others think the psalm was written at a different time in David's life, yet another instance in which David was hiding, fearing for his life, this time because his son Absalom sought to kill him and reign as king in his place. Whatever the case may be, when I think of David in seclusion, fearing for his life, I can't help but be reminded of our current circumstance. As we hide out in our homes, as we distance ourselves from a threat to our lives, perhaps this is an opportunity to read these words from David's perspective, and perhaps when we consider the 23rd Psalm from his point of view it leads us to focus less on the beautifully written words of the poem, and more on the personal, living Word of God.

You see, to David these aren't just words on a page. David has experienced God in all of these ways. He's heard the Shepherd's voice, felt His tender care, and followed Him all the days of his life. David knows the Shepherd, and understands that in the powerful presence of the Good Shepherd there is

not only peace, there is purpose. In God's presence there is Divine purpose on every path and in every circumstance. Listen to the way David illustrates that truth. He tells us that the Shepherd "*leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...*" (vs. 3-4). There is a popular version of Christianity that would have us believe when things aren't going well, the only explanation is that we've fallen away from God. That kind of Christianity tells people that God's "*paths of righteousness*" will always be "*green pastures*" and "*still waters,*" but that's just not the truth, and it's not what David indicates either. David is a man who has been led by the Shepherd in paths of righteousness, that go straight through the valley of the shadow of death.

The truth is, this side of heaven there are valleys, there are "*trials and sorrows*" of every kind (John 16:33). As Paul and Barnabas taught, "*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*" (Acts 14:22). Notice they didn't say we may or we might, but "*we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.*" Sometimes God allows time in the valley, because the Good Shepherd knows that often this is the best way to take His flock to a better place, and while it may not be easy for us to recognize that when we're in the middle of it all, we have God's promise that "*all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*" (Romans 8:28). In other words, God redeems all that He allows.

David is the example we've been considering this morning, and the fact that all things work together for our good and God's glory is a truth we see manifested in his life. When you think of David hiding in cave, fearing for his life because King Saul was out to kill him, remember that after this experience in the valley, David was made king of Judah, then king over all of Israel. David is one example of the way the Good Shepherd leads us through life's darkest valleys to the end that He may bless us on the other side, and his example is just one of many. We could talk about Joseph being sold into slavery by his own brothers, a valley experience that eventually led him to become such a powerful ruler that in Egypt he was second only to pharaoh. We could talk about Moses herding sheep in the desert for forty years, forty years that led him to a personal meeting with Almighty God at the burning

bush, and speaking of forty years, you'll remember that Caleb and Joshua spent that much time wandering in the wilderness before they were finally able to enter the Promised Land; and most of all, God in the Person of Jesus Christ, endured the darkest valley to attain what awaited Him on the other side. Our Lord's Passion and horrific crucifixion led to His glorious Resurrection and the redemption of the world.

So we see that in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ the Shepherd of our souls, every valley is a pathway that leads to something far better. None of us know how long it will take to walk the difficult path that we're on now, but in the valley peace is not found in what you know, peace is found in Who you know. You know the Shepherd, fix your eyes on Him (Hebrews 12:2), know that He has a plan and a purpose in leading you on this path, and what you will find is the peace of God, which passes all understanding, is not found in where we are, but in Who He is.