

## *The Shadow of Death*

a message for Good Shepherd Sunday (Easter 4), May 3, 2020

by Rev. David Denoon

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, I have no doubt, is the most-memorized portion of the Bible. It is also the most-repeated. I have no evidence to back this up, I just know that I personally memorized Psalm 23 because I repeated it so often as part of funerals and other services I perform.

You may hear a confession in that. You may hear me admitting to you that I did not memorize the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as a youngster. I was in my late 20s before I knew it by heart. Many of you probably had to memorize Psalm 23 for a Sunday School class, or in order to receive your first Bible. Your teachers knew that it would prove useful for you, someday.

I didn't learn it then. But I know it now by heart. And I have to tell you, I am surprised every time I meet a colleague who isn't able to recite it. *How could they not know this?* I wonder. And I try to remind myself that the revisions that have been done to its traditional language from the King James Version, and our general sensitivity against the use of gender exclusive language, may have made its memorization feel like something impossible for them. Or its recitation futile.

For my part, it is one of the few scriptures that I myself will say without adjustments either to make the words sound more contemporary or to erase gender bias. I do that with almost every other scripture I read or recite. But not with Psalm 23. I rationalize my traditionalism, telling myself that people around me when I say it will want to say it with me, and they deserve to be affirmed for having it memorized.

We Protestants tend to use it the way that Catholics use the "Hail Mary," as a supplement to the Prayer of Our Savior or our favorite creed or covenant. And this is because it's comforting to say. The imagery is so vivid – green pastures, a pond without a ripple on it, the right path in the wilderness, even one with the shadow of death overhanging it...

I've been thinking a lot about the psalm's usefulness, not only because this is Easter 4 of the Christian calendar and therefore the Feast of the Good Shepherd (so, yes, obviously we would be saying it today). This is simply a time, historically speaking, when we need words of comfort. We need comforting. We need comfortable things to do. And, between the threat of a virus (which one prominent politician has come to label, an "invisible enemy")... between that and the kind of feeling you just had when I mentioned that politician – in other words, the rancorous political landscape in which we dwell – we can feel as if we are walking in death's shadow.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm settles us into a pastoral environment, in a field near a pond for what seems like a picnic. And if that isn't comfort enough, the writer asserts that the sacred space, God's house, God's sanctuary, is where we will always reside. The words and their cadence, combined with these images, seem to have been designed expressly for the purpose of soothing the aching heart, for quieting anxieties.

How are you doing, lately? Are you finding outlets to relieve stress? Are you gardening or reading or learning something new or calling others on the phone or playing music or meditating?

I'm thinking that indulging one's compulsions, addictions, or obsessions is probably not the way to face this time. That's self-medicating, and you may think that you know what's best for you, but without someone else, someone learned and professional, to second your opinion, I think you ought to stop it.

I know this time isn't easy for any of us.

And I know there are some who are having an especially tough time of it, right now. I've spoken with some of you and heard about more of you, for whom comforting words like these I'm talking about are not going to offer much of a reprieve for very long at a time, if they offer any at all. It's crazy to be in the hospital just now, or to be dealing with mental illness or

addiction, or to be grieving.

When we are in the midst of such a crisis, spiritual or mental pain or physical pain, when we just cannot seem to shake our despair or loathing, the immediacy of those sensations can cause us to feel cut off from the things or words or people who usually reassure us. They cause feelings of isolation and aloneness, or of desperation. These are the times when we need a sanctuary, like the words of Psalm 23, to remind us: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

When I was eighteen a co-worker of mine died a violent death. I wasn't there to see it, but I heard about it, and I attended the funeral. I remember the images in my mind of what his moment of death must have been like, the emptiness, helplessness, and meaninglessness I felt. And how the pastor said in the sermon at the funeral that, sometimes, things like this happen. And we'll ask where God is... and why this... and how sometimes the world doesn't make sense, and it isn't going to make sense. How sometimes the world isn't OK, and things aren't going to be OK; we just have to learn to live with them. And how it's the same for joy as it is for grief, but when it's joy we call the unexpectedness and inexplicability grace, while we don't have a word for the why of grief.

He walked us for that little while through the valley of the shadow of death, as we sat there with that family, hoping that they might find a way through that same valley.

And here, these forty years later, I've come to know that the pastor was right. This kind of stuff happens every day. But it's heightened and magnified now, in this time of quarantine and isolation, for the people who suffer it. What I mean to say is that we are always living in death's shadow, but there are instances when we are more aware of it than at others.

By the same token, I don't have to tell you that there are also those moments of inexplicable joy when we sense God's grace, God's special favor for us who know God. And for some reason, both moments can exist in the same space and time... and always do. Because those green meadows in which we lie down and enjoy the bread and the cup may not seem to correspond with the valley of the shadow of death through which we walk, but both do exist simultaneously. And we cannot, we must not, ignore this truth.

Somewhere, a few thousand years back, there was a person who realized this truth and wrote this psalm, full of the affirmation not only of those moments' simultaneous existence but of God's presence in both cases, with the faithful always loving and sustaining.

On another occasion, a thousand years later, Jesus would argue with a group of fellow Jews and tell them about himself and his experience of life with his people. He said that he was a figurative gate for figurative sheep to pass safely into the care of their figurative shepherd and out of the clutches of figurative thieves who had sneaked over the figurative fence. There was danger all around, and life can be perilous, but it is also deeply blessed, because we go with One who loves us and provides for us. No amount of pain will ever prevent that, and no surplus of joy will ever obscure it.

We are the beloved of God – our Shepherd, our Gate, our Gatekeeper – always observant of our going out and our coming in, and abundantly providing for us.

Thanks be to God.

