

"In The Valley" ~ A sermon by the Rev. Robert Stewart
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
May 3, 2020 ~ Fourth Sunday of Easter
Psalm 23, John 10:1-10 , 11, 14, 16

Psalm 23 *A translation by Rob Stewart*

- 1 The LORD God is my shepherd, I have everything I need.
- 2 God gives me rest in green pastures;
 and leads me through calm waters;
- 3 and restores my very soul.
 God leads me along the right paths so that I will bless God's name.
- 4 Even though I walk through treacherous valleys,
 I fear no evil; for you are with me, O Shepherd;
 your rod of protection and your staff of leadership give me comfort.
- 5 You prepare a feast for me and invite my enemies to eat with me;
 you anoint my head with the oil of blessing; my life overflows with joy.
- 6 Surely goodness and graciousness surround me every day,
 As I remain within the household of the Good Shepherd my whole life long.

John 10:1-10 , 11, 14, 16 The Scholars Version

1 "Anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate but climbs in some other way is nothing but a thief and a robber. 2 But the one who comes through the gate is the shepherd.

3 The gatekeeper lets the shepherd in. The sheep recognize his voice; he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has driven out the last of his own sheep, he walks in front of them, and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice. 5 They would never follow a stranger, but would run from him since they don't know the voice of strangers."

6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they didn't understand what he was talking about. 7 Jesus went on to say,

"As God is my witness, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are nothing but thieves and robbers; but the sheep haven't paid any attention to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever comes in through me will be safe, and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and slaughter and lay waste. I came so they can have life and have it to the full."

11 "I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for his sheep."

14 "I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me."

16 "I have sheep from another fold, and I must lead them, too. They'll recognize my voice, and there'll be one flock, one shepherd."

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was a Presbyterian. And a very kind doctor. She told the story of a little boy with whom she once worked who was in the final stages of leukemia. She asked him to draw a picture that showed her how he was feeling about his illness. He drew a portrait of himself surrounded by dark thunderclouds in the sky. There was also a cannon pointed directly at his heart.

The doctor looked at it thoughtfully, then she asked him if she could add something to it. When he nodded yes, she sketched a figure of herself, standing beside the little boy in the picture. She was facing the cannon too, with an arm snug around his shoulder. A few days later, her young patient drew another picture, all on his own. In this one you can see the sun, and flowers everywhere, and his self-portrait that includes a smile on his face. There was not a cannon to be seen.

Aren't children amazing? Their forthrightness and honesty so often surprise us adults. Children often bring a trusting innocence; while adults, who have been hardened by disappointments, hurt and anger, are more reluctant to trust. In this quiet interchange between doctor and child we have a simple description of the 23rd Psalm. It is a picture of trust and hope. It is a vision of the reliability of a God who stands with us in the face of fear and suffering.

Who among us has not found ourselves at one time or another in a foreboding and difficult valley? And is not the entire world now experiencing a scary menace that impacts each one of us? In times of distress, we reach for protection and comfort.

Psalm 23 is known as one of the "pilgrimage psalms"—one of the songs of praise sung by pilgrims on their way up to the Temple in Jerusalem. People go on a pilgrimage to discover anew that in their walking and their praying, in their observing and reflecting, God goes with them. As we go, as we pray, God gives us wisdom, encouragement and strength. Haven't you found that to be true?

Many of us are fond of the King James Version of Psalm 23. You may have committed it to memory. One particularly powerful line is, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil: for thou art with me...." This, my friends, is exactly where we are walking today. SO, how is that walk going for you? Does fear accompany you? Are you searching for comfort?

In this Psalm, the songwriter reminds us that God is with us, like a Shepherd guarding and guiding his sheep. The whole idea of a shepherd may seem out of place in our technological age. One thing I've learned is that sometimes shepherds lead from behind, while other times they lead from out front. Isn't this how we might describe our experience with God? Sometimes the path that we are moving along is just not looking right or feeling safe. The path might be rocky and treacherous, and we may feel very uncomfortable.

Then, other times, little things happen that cause us to feel, "God is here. God is with me." And how often have we looked back and saw that God was guiding us all along! Sometimes God led us along paths that we would never have chosen for ourselves. Yet we find ourselves in a good and wonderful new place.

Indeed, it is by the Grace of God that we trust, and receive, and then respond with gratitude. These may be seen as invitations from a Good Shepherd who is leading us into a life of stillness and peace, despite that scary valley we may be in. Like that sad little boy who was scared to die, we too can come to trust that God is present in both green pastures and along difficult paths.

Wise people know that God does not dismantle every scary cannon aimed at our lives. God does not remove every peril that comes our way. But God DOES stand with us in our troubles, wrapping a loving arm around our shoulders. It is God's presence that strengthens our hearts, faith that clears our minds so that we may see and feel God walking alongside us in precarious places. God dispels our fears as we walk in the Valley of Trust. As we trust God's shepherding, we become far better at everything we do, whether it is parenting, partnering and being a good neighbor.

When I was in college, I joined a group that met weekly to learn folk dances from different cultures. What made it fun was the progress we gradually made: first learning a dance and then improving until we became rather accomplished. One of my favorites was square dancing. I think that square dancing is the perfect social activity. First you dance with your partner; then your "corner" on the other side of you and before long, you are allamande-lefting with everyone as you make your way around the square.

Our group included a blind woman. Even in the more complicated dances, she, too, would reach out her hand and take a step trusting that her next dance partner would take hold of her hand and together, they would continue on in the dance.

This kind of dancing is such a great example of how we live in faith with neighbors. Not only do we help one another through the daily activities of life, but we all depend upon the Caller who calls out the moves we should make. As the psalmist says, this is how we move from the valley of mistrust into the community of God's light and love.

Sadly, these days we are not able to sit down with one another let alone be dancing together! But still, we go on, doing what we can, caring for one another despite the distancing. Trust that God is leading us through both good, green pastures as well as the treacherous valleys all the way to the realm of everlasting life.

Faith and trust make all the difference as we face whatever comes our way. Faith and trust dissolve our fears and uncertainties, and even when death comes. With trust, we can even approach death as one more stage on our journey toward eternal rest with God.

The Good Shepherd promises us that all we really need, we shall receive. Even when we walk in scary valleys, God is with us. We shall fear no evil, for God is here. “Surely, goodness and mercy SHALL follow us all the days of our lives—and we will dwell in the household of God forever.”

As we journey on through this Easter season, let us remember that because of Christ’s astounding gift of lavish grace, we can lift our hearts and joyfully dance the dance of life. We can freely and courageously share with others the gifts of our lives. Does this seem reckless? Maybe. Foolish? Sure. But as God leads us through the Valleys of Uncertainty, we will find that trusting is the only way to live life fully and completely, in love and with joy.
May this be so for us!