

Certainty in an Uncertain World

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.

³He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, have you ever carefully considered what it takes to get out of bed in the morning? I'm not talking about sliding out from between the covers and then putting your feet on the cold floor. I am talking about seriously considering the day that awaits you. Your calendar may be full of appointments and activities, or the day may appear rather quiet, but whether any of them ever comes to fruition remains uncertain. Only the end of the day can confirm whether or not we have been successful, whether our plans were fulfilled, or we relaxed and enjoyed the day. Many times, my daily plans have faded quickly away as some unforeseen opportunity or challenge presented itself. Taking that first step out of bed is stepping into the unknown.

Back in the first century B. C., when much of the world was unexplored, and unmapped, map makers had to have some way of portraying those areas of the earth that were as yet unexplored. So, they symbolized these regions by dragons, monsters and large fish. The message was clear. Uncharted territories were frightening, fearsome places. Terrors lay buried there. But as many maps declared, "There be treasures" as well.

As legend expresses it, a commander of a battalion of Roman soldiers was caught up in a battle that took him into territory that the map makers had represented with monsters and dragons. Not knowing whether to forge ahead into the unknown, or turn back into the known, which would also be a retreat, he dispatched a messenger to Rome with his urgent request: “Please send new orders. We have marched off the map.”

We are marching off the map. Today we find ourselves in uncharted territory as we march off the technical map, the political map, the economic map, the environmental map, the theological map, or whatever map you can think of. How can we possibly hope to chart our way through all these uncharted territories? How can we get up in the morning, not knowing what is ahead of us? We overcome the uncertainty by relying on my favorite scripture passage, Psalm 23, the six longest short verses in the Bible.

As I read and reread this morning's text it neatly divided itself into three sections, what I call the Shepherd's leading, the Shepherd's protection, and the Shepherd's blessing.

I. The Shepherd's Leading

Imagine 24 Navy chaplains divided into groups of six, each group equipped with a lensatic compass, a radio, a topographic map, and then dropped in the middle of the rough, jungle terrain of Okinawa. The groups were told to navigate from where they were to points B, C, D, and E, and radio back their location at the various points to make certain they were in the proper place. The map didn't show dragons and monsters. No, it should have depicted large banana spiders and poisonous habu snakes. We didn't need a map; we needed a guide.

The first three verses of Psalm 23 declare that during our entire lives as we traverse a strange, new, always changing territory, our great Shepherd will guide us. He has the entire chart, the big chart, the chart of the entire universe in his head. He has that chart in multiple scales, from large to small, and there isn't any place he hasn't seen. He leads us.

David, the shepherd boy, had a map in his head. He led his family's precious flock from pastures near their home to remote ones. Sheep crop the grass down to the ground, so they need to move every so often to give the pasture a rest. David led his family's flock to the next pasture and to the next. He led them from the wadis that dried up in the summer sun to pools of fresh water. However, in so doing he had to avoid streams that were too wide or too swollen for the sheep to safely cross. He had to skirt some pastures, no matter how pleasant they looked, that were insufficient to feed the flock. He had to lead them safely for his reputation and his family's livelihood depended on his sound judgment. David extrapolated his experience as shepherd boy to that of God as the Good Shepherd.

Just as David led his family's flock to pasture, drink, safe rest, and restoration, so David trusted that his God led him also. David confessed supreme, ultimate trust in his God to lead him because God's reputation was on the line. God didn't say to David, "Just trust me." God said, "Test me. See if I am not faithful. See if I don't fulfill my promises." If God didn't follow through, His reputation was at stake. "He leads us in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

What gets you up in the morning? Do you turn a blind eye to the world and its disappointment and pain, and pretend these things don't exist? Or do you entrust yourself into the hands of the Good Shepherd? That is a frightening, mind-boggling decision! "Today, all day I will entrust myself to the Lord's care." Isn't there a bit of hesitation in all of us to hold back just a little bit? We immerse ourselves in God except for our little pinky, which we keep hooked to the lifeline so we can pull ourselves back. David calls us to let go, all the way, completely. Let God take the burden. How can we do so? We can do so because God has proved himself trustworthy for His name's sake.

II. The Shepherd's Protection.

As a shepherd boy tending his father's flock, David was charged with safely leading them through the deep, treacherous ravines that crisscrossed the Judean wilderness. In many places, passage through these narrow chasms was reduced to a single-file stretch, winding its way along cliffs and rocks rife with hiding places for all manner of creatures -- hyenas, wolves, lions, thieves -- not to mention falling rocks. Such a dangerous path was termed a "glen of doom" or "a valley of the death-shadow."

The power of Psalm 23 comes from its use of two key words in our second segment: though and through. There are dangers lurking around every corner. There is no guarantee that if we get out of bed in the morning, we will get back into it at night. Though and through are the same word except for a single letter "r." This one little letter makes all the difference in the world. It is the letter that can turn your though into a through.

David, the innocent shepherd-boy, knew the truth behind that first word though -- there are dangers lurking around every corner. There was no "if" about the reality of life's obstacles and problems. Psalm 23 boldly and honestly faces the reality. It does not lament "if" I walk through the valley, but though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Life isn't all green valleys and still waters and overflowing cups and lavish banquets. Sometimes our hair isn't anointed with oil running down our necks but rather perspiration running down our necks or tears glistening on our cheeks and running into the corner of our mouths. Sometimes we are not

lounging in green pastures with the warm sun overhead, but we are struggling in another Monday.

At this point I am going to take my staff, don my explorer's hat, pretend we are walking through the valley.

Every one of us has our valley. Sometimes we start walking our valley at birth. We grow up with abuse, or poverty, or illness. Sometimes we create our own valleys by drugs, or alcohol, or ignorance, or violence, or selfishness or greed. Sometimes our valleys find us through death, or divorce, or disaster, or joblessness. But while we are walking through the valley of the shadow, David assures us that God, specifically the Son, is with us and that the God with us bears all the sufferings and pains of the world and the hurts of our quaking souls. God is with us in whatever we face. For the Christian, the cross becomes the symbol of the agony endured by both creation and Creator. "Thy rod, thy staff, and thy CROSS, they comfort me."

Notice the preposition used here, "through." I once commented on this in a funeral sermon. Through means we will make it to the other side. The valley will open up again and present us with new green vistas. This is a not a walk in the valley, or a walk around the valley, or a walk into the valley, but through it. It is not a resting place but a passageway to somewhere else. We can walk through our screwups. We can walk through our problems and sorrows. We can walk through our tragedies and pain. And ultimately, we will walk through our own deaths and arrive in the Shepherd's pasture, the new Jerusalem, the wedding feast of the Lamb where there will be no more pain or sorrow or tears. Knowing God, trusting Him leads us to reframe our lives. I like what one author has written, "King Saul thought Goliath was too big to fight; David thought he was too big to miss."

III. The Shepherd's Blessing.

I have read and studied this psalm innumerable times but recently something occurred to me for the first time. Verse four, the one about the valley and shadows, separates two beautiful, pastoral scenes. However, the scene on the far side of verse four is more grand and powerful.

In the early 90s Marilyn and I had the opportunity to visit Hong Kong as a part of a military chaplain conference. The last night before departing Hong Kong and heading into China we attended a banquet at the America Club of Hong Kong. It was located at the top of a tall skyscraper in the downtown area. Large windows surrounded the banquet hall. Banquet tables were set with white linen tablecloths, fine china, crystal stemware and silver place settings. Waiters dressed in jackets brought us sumptuous food. We ate as the sun set over Hong Kong. The lights of the city glowed all around and below us. But if we stood at the windows and looked hard enough, we could just barely see the coast of mainland China. The border between Hong

Kong and China was protected by barbed wire and Chinese soldiers in dark green uniforms with bright red collar liners and insignia, rifles in hand. Now I understand a little more clearly, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

The Shepherd prepares a table before us. This is an emblem of hospitality and trust. God gives us not only our daily bread, for which it is our duty to thank and praise Him, but He gives us something greater than ordinary food. The Shepherd who walked the valley ahead of us has given us the gift of his body and blood in the Lord's Table. This is an amazing, precious gift because eating and drinking and faith brings us forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with the Father, the strengthening of our faith, and the promise of eternal life. We will certainly dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

As I was pondering our text this last week, an old-fashioned time keeper, the hour glass, popped into my head. I ask you to imagine an hour glass sitting before you, a large part of the glass is on the top, and another on the bottom. Between the top and the bottom is a narrow passageway that permits a slow drain of sand, grain by grain, top to bottom. Now think of verses 1-3 as God's blessings for this life – he makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me besides still waters, he leads me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake. Wonderful! However, everyone must pass through the “valley of the shadow death,” verse 4, to get to even greater blessings. We do not make this journey alone; Christ has preceded us and walks with us. He became sin in our place, and we became his righteousness by declaration of the Father. Verses 5-6 tell us what waits for us on the other side of the valley. God has prepared a table for us, he anoints our heads with oil, our cups overflow, mercy and righteousness follow us, and we will dwell in the Kingdom of Glory, in the presence of the Lamb and his Father, forever and ever.

During my intern year at a congregation, one of my responsibilities was to conduct shut-in visits. I recall regularly visiting one very old lady who resided in a nursing home. I always found her sitting in the hallway by herself; perhaps she was alone because she couldn't hear and couldn't keep up a conversation. Her husband and children had preceded her in death. I felt awkward attempting to communicate with her since I had to yell, but I quickly learned that when I started reciting the Lord's Prayer or the 23rd Psalm she would jump right in. She would recite them loudly and boldly. I wonder how many times she had walked through the valley, but there was no doubt about who and what brought her comfort. We have a great Shepherd who knows, calls, leads, protects, and has and will prepare a table before us. Our Shepherd is risen! (*He is risen indeed!*) Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Dei Gloria!