

“Walking”

Psalm 23

The 23rd Psalm. When I ask confirmation students or even high school students which of the psalms is the most popular and read the most often, very few can answer. But, as we grow older, and as we attend more and more funerals, as our spiritual life becomes deeper and more disciplined, the 23rd Psalm becomes more and more familiar to us until by the time we die, many of us have memorized this psalm.

Why? Why do people who are sick or dying seek out the words of this psalm? Why do people who are grieving the loss of a loved one find comfort in this psalm? Is it just another beautiful and appropriate poem? Do people really think about and appreciate the imagery that is used? Do people understand why the psalmist is writing and what he is writing?

The answer to these questions is very simple. The psalmist is confessing his faith in God during a crisis situation. He doesn't tell us what the crisis is. If he were alive today, maybe one of his parents just died. Maybe he just lost his job. Maybe the bank just foreclosed on his house. Maybe he just went through a divorce. Maybe is he having a difficult time accepting his son's homosexuality. Maybe he has just moved to a new town and had to leave all his friends and family behind. Maybe his grandmother is preparing for or recovering from surgery. Maybe he lives in fear of contracting the corona virus. Whatever his situation, we do know he is hurting and lonely. He turns to God for comfort and peace.

He begins with a confession of faith. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Here, as in so many other places in the Bible, God is portrayed as the shepherd and we are his sheep.

Jesus portrays himself as the shepherd when in John 10 he says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; I lay down my life for the sheep.”

This is the shepherd the psalmist confesses his faith in. The shepherd who is absolutely responsible for his flock. Not the hireling who runs off at the first sight of danger, but the true shepherd who is willing to protect and serve all of the sheep in his charge even to the point of putting their lives before his own. Jesus nailed to a cross. The one shepherd is sacrificed to save the many sheep. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” He confesses his faith in the one true shepherd and believes he shall never be in want.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” The shepherd goes before his flock, guides it, and leads it to a place of green pastures where the flock may rest by still waters.

This is exactly what Jesus does in Mark 6 and throughout the Gospel story. “Jesus retires to a distant field, a lonely place, to find some rest and rejuvenation. But many saw him going, and they ran there on foot from all the towns, and got there ahead of him. They were like sheep without a shepherd; and Jesus began to teach them many things.”

The people run to their shepherd. Not until they reach the place where he is, do they slow down to a walk, sit down, relax, and listen to their shepherd-teacher. The shepherd calms his flock; gives them a serenity and peace that enables them to lie down, stay awhile, and listen.

Not unlike a new mother calming her newborn; giving him a serenity and peace that enables him to close his eyes into a deep sleep.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” This fourth verse of the psalm, I feel, is the most important verse, and has much to teach us.

It describes what the psalmist is feeling. He is feeling a sense of being closed in, of going through a valley with high cliffs on both sides and only being able to go straight ahead. We know he is really hurting when he describes it as the “valley of the shadow of death”. It sounds as though death is just ahead.

When we’re spending most of our time at home because of the virus, he is walking which means he is taking his time. When we are in one of those crisis situations it is not just space that seems to close in on us, but time does, too. Time hangs heavy, it seems endless. Think about the last time you laid in a hospital bed or sat at a funeral home. As the darkness of the valley closes in, there is a desire to flee from the darkness, to run through the valley as fast as we can and not look back.

We want out of the place where darkness seems to cover our hope, where no one, including your pastor, seems to have the answers. There are only questions and silence. Even God seems to be silent. We feel a tremendous press to get beyond the painful moment, to run through the valley and get out as quickly as possible.

When we are in a crisis situation, our perception of space and time is altered. We see things differently. We feel things we do not usually feel – the valley closing in.

We do and say crazy things. Our usual ability to think our way through a situation is lost as our mind races non-productively around the same track over and over again.

Where we usually feel a broad range of emotions, in a crisis, our feelings are much more likely to be variations on just two feelings. Either anger which tells us to fight or fear which tells us to run. Our sensitivity to the needs of others is lost as our world collapses into the valley of the shadow of death. When this happens and it eventually happens to all of us, our first tendency is to get angry at God and to run through the crisis, hoping it will end quickly.

But the psalmist who obviously had a great faith in God says, “Slow down”. “Walk”. Do not follow your instincts which say, “Run”. We have to learn to do something other than follow our instincts. We have to follow our faith.

Our instincts press us to run; our faith invites us to walk through the valleys of our lives. God’s supportive presence is the psalmist’s hope as he walks through the valley of the shadow, even the shadow of death. The promise of the Word of God is not to those who run, but to those who walk in the faith that they do not walk alone. As a newborn baby and his parents do not walk alone with family and church there to support them along the way. As Sue Marko does not walk alone in grieving the death of her husband, Al.

When Al Marko went to work for Cleveland Tom’s vending, he met a young woman named Sue who was a little bit gun shy at that point. After dating for 9 years, Al and Sue were joined together in the covenant of marriage on May 4, 1991 at Divinity.

Sue knew she was marrying a man who bowled in 7 bowling leagues, had bowled a 300, was on a team called I.C. – the inner circle, and hung out with a guy named “Gooch”.

Al would be pretty quiet during a game and then would assure his team to let him know when they needed him to carry them. Al was also appreciated for his text message humor. Al also enjoyed attending March madness basketball games and Indians baseball.

Al's soul was restored when he was working on projects like finishing off his basement the right way or doing facetime with Adam to make sure he installed his basement shelves the right way. Al expected Sue to be the disciplinarian and let her know when Adam needed reprimanding.

Adam has fond memories riding around in Al's black Camaro listening to the Indians on 1100. Nephew Bobby gives thanks for a fun uncle he would spend time with during the summers at his grandparents. Adam gives thanks for a father you describe as "selfless" in everything he did, always responding to the needs of others before his own needs. Lucy, Penelope, and Quinn give thanks for a grandfather who always provided them with plenty of art supplies.

I've gotten to know Al in recent years when I visited with him in the hospital and when he was rehabbing. Al was just a nice guy. He was very respectful, friendly, and appreciative of my visits. He loved God and his family. He was worried about becoming a burden for Sue and very much appreciated her love and caregiving.

We spent time talking about Jesus' Last Supper before his crucifixion and resurrection. I prayed the Lord's Prayer with Al before he received Christ's presence in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

Al had been walking and then in a wheelchair making his way through the valley of the shadow of death for a while. Sometimes it's a slow, frustrating journey. Al knew Christ was with him and would be there to guide him through the gate of death.

For any person to choose to walk when he or she feels like running is a risk, but I have personally found no way to be open to God while running and relying on my own resources. I continually remind myself that my growth as a pastor and as a person has involved my becoming vulnerable and choosing to find my strength not in myself but in Christ. Sue is now finding her strength in Christ as well. Erik Schumacher's daughters, Diana and Tammy, and grandsons Austin and Joshua, can find strength in Christ as they walk through the valley of Erik's death.

This is why I think the 23rd Psalm is so very much loved. The writer has an incredible faith which enables him to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and to fear no evil. He walks when most of us would run. He become vulnerable and opens himself to God when most of us close ourselves to God and rely on our own resources. He fears no evil when most of us are scared out of our pants.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross found in her studies that we usually go through five stages when in a crisis or suffering a loss. First we deny it and isolate ourselves, second we become angry, third we try to bargain with God, fourth we become depressed, and last we accept what has happened. The psalmist is telling us to walk through these stages trusting we will be guided through the valley, knowing God's presence will be felt through us and through those who are closest to us.

“For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me”. What is first experienced as loss and grief is eventually turned to comfort. God's comfort does not usually come directly to us, but through those people, those ministers around us. Being called to serve one another is being called to comfort one another. Simple words can be so comforting, such as reading this 23rd Psalm.

In the last two verses the psalmist continues to confess his faith. In the end, God himself prepares for us a table, anoints our heads with oil and our cups overflow. God is to be the host and the servant. How right the psalmist was.

One thousand years later a man named Jesus came along and served his guests bread and wine and even washed their feet. We live 3,000 years after this psalm was written and we continue to eat from the Lord's table and we continue to depend on him to slow us down and to guide us through the valleys of our lives and finally through the valley of the shadow of death.

The psalmist concludes, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever".

#325 – I Want Jesus to Walk With Me