

Even the Darkest Valley

Psalm 23

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Psalm 23 NRSV

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Psalm 23 KJV

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: he 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; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I shall not want. He restores my soul. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, through the shadow of death, you comfort me, and are with me, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me as I will always dwell with you, O God.

Can there be any greater and familiar words of comfort? Rabbi Harold Kushner, best known for his classic, reassuring book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, speaks of the psalm's ability to comfort us when the dangerous randomness of the world breaks into our lives, leaving us anxious, vulnerable and scared, and so in need of God's grace, peace, and encouragement, through these words,

"God is good. Nature is not good. Nature is blind. Nature is amoral. Fire burns and bullets wound and falling rocks injure and disease germs infect everybody, whether you deserve it or not."

It is this randomness, this giant crapshoot, that is the enemy in the global presence. Day by day there are new guidelines and more bad news. Yet my friends, there is *hope*. There is grace, encouragement and God's love.

In these days we turn to the Lord our shepherd just as our faith ancestors did when David wrote this psalm, and as people have been consoled and comforted for nearly 3000 years.

This psalm is entrenched in us, it is in the DNA of our faith. Even those who are of no faith are familiar with it from funerals, tv scenes and movies. It is a psalm many have memorized.

Several years ago I first learned of the power of this Psalm to provide comfort and reassurance in a very unlikely place. As I was preparing my first worship service for a local nursing home memory care unit, someone reminded me that those attending would be more

familiar with the King James bible than other more current translations, so I did take my familiar passages from there.

One of the residents present was stretched out in his geri-chair, a comfortable, well-padded type of wheelchair that lays out almost flat.

He had been quiet, passive throughout the service. I thought that he was probably asleep, until I began to read, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures...” Suddenly this bright, vibrant, crystal clear baritone voice joined me word for word for the rest of the psalm. Each time I went back this scene repeated itself. Somewhere deep in his memory, the reassurance and comfort resonated with him, for him.

Another man I met several years ago had once been a trumpet player in Jimmy Dorsey’s band before going to serve in the Army during WWII. While in battle he lost his left arm, and so sadly his career. But he didn’t lose his love of music. He adapted a way to play the trumpet with only his right hand—which was amazing to see—and he continued to play for his own pleasure. As he became elderly and frail his playlist came down to 2 hymns that had carried him through the war, through the loss of his arm, and other painful, sad, difficult times in his life when he needed to know that God was with him no matter what. His playlist contained *Amazing Grace* and *The Lord’s My Shepherd*.

In these days that feel as if we are living in a B grade movie as so much just seems odd, disjointed, and confusing day by day, in these days when it is all too easy to see too much of the news while trying to be safe and educated, when we see the horrendous effects of an invisible monster, when we love each other enough to stay away, when life as we have known it is on hold—broken and empty for some—we need a shepherd to guide us through this darkest valley, to keep us from wandering off into despair and hopelessness, to sustain us so that we lack nothing. We seek the food of green pastures, the cool, refreshing still waters that quench our thirst for patience, understanding and relief, the assurance that we are on the right path, that we are taking the right safety and wisdom measures.

We look to the Shepherd to restore calmness and peace within us, that the uncertainty and anxiety that burns within will instead be tamed as we wander in the new and frightening wilderness. We put our faith and trust in the Shepherd’s rod, the sense of discipline and structure that holds us safe, just as much as we rely on the staff that we can lean on for strength and support when we are weak and tired. No matter how mystifying it may be as we stumble and falter our way through the darkness, faith, hope and trust are always appropriate responses as they keep us moving forward.

Even in the deepest wilderness, the darkest valley, we can already see beyond and to the banquet, the celebration, the peace, beyond this no-man’s land. Already we can imagine again hugging one another, being with family and friends, going back to school, work, and church, eating at our favorite restaurants, having grocery stores well stocked, traveling, watching sports and reclaiming our routines.

Yet just as we will again be blessed, we will be changed. We will have seen life from a different perspective after we have had this time to reset our lives and our priorities. Social distancing calls us to see the isolation many experienced before Covid-19. The delivery of breakfast and lunch to school children opens our eyes to the food insecurity of more in our communities than we had recognized before. The absence of the most basic items at the grocery store calls us to be aware of those who always live with shortages.

Yet just as we will again be blessed, we will be changed. We will have a deeper understanding and appreciation for first responders, for grocery store employees, for medical

care providers, for post office workers, and for truck drivers, who have been the frontlines as we have been sidelined. We'll treasure the creativity and sharp learning curve of teachers who suddenly made remote learning possible. We will see how our actions and attitudes have helped children learn to cope with change, disappointment and disruption. Our cups will overflow with the stories of generosity of people caring for others, for offering acts of care, grace and compassion for strangers. We'll continue to be inspired by the landlords who asked their tenants use their rent money for other needs, by a stranger who presented an older woman with flowers at the grocery store, by the family who celebrated a loved one's birthday outside her nursing home window, by the online gatherings that have kept us together as a community, and by the teddy bears in our windows.

So, my friends, surely goodness and mercy shall indeed follow us all the days of our lives as we dwell in the guidance, protection and assurance of the Lord forever, whether those days are carefree or are overwhelming. Amen