

Psalm 23:4
God in the Dark Valley
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One of the most profound moments of my life, other than the birth of my three children and my marriage to Amy, happened to me this last year. As you may recall, I had the privilege of being invited to travel through the Holy Land with our friends and mission partners from The Outreach Foundation. Our particular trip coincided with our President's tour of the Middle East, and on the day he was to visit the West Bank and Bethlehem, our tour guide wisely thought—might be best if we schedule a day trip to Jericho.

We set off early in the morning making our way out of the old city of Jerusalem, down through the village of Bethany (where Jesus' friends Mary, Martha, dear Lazarus were from). From there we got on a 3-lane highway toward Jericho that took us down and down. As we drove the landscape became increasingly desolate and barren. Then about 30 minutes into the drive our tour guide unexpectedly took us off the highway and on to a desert road, eventually stopping at what appeared to be some sort of scenic overlook. What we were about to see would be for many of us the most profound tourist site of the trip.

As we stood high up on a hilltop, looking down at a jagged and threatening descent Said our tour guide pointed our attention to the floor of the canyon. A small creek, not more than a trickle, a few palm trees offering very limited shade, and a Greek Orthodox chapel built into the side of the mountain.

Welcome to the valley of the shadow of death (show Picture). Tradition suggests, and it is very plausible, that as David was on the run from King Saul who was seeking to kill him, this is what he saw that inspired his writing of verse 4 of this majestic psalm. Aside from a few scattered trees and a trickle of water, this valley was a desolate and bleak place.

As we're looking closely at this text in the month of November we are looking, particularly at the God who not only provides, but who inspires our generosity. And what I want to suggest to you this morning is that deep and profound generosity comes from a life that is no longer gripped by fear. When you have come face to face with the prospect of it being God plus nothing else, not the experience, not the windfall of blessing, not the health, not the security, when all of those things pale in comparison to the obstacle you face and it's you and God. Generosity takes on a whole new meaning.

Last week we looked at the first few verses, He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters, my soul is restored and guided in righteous paths because that is God's dream for my life. These are some of the most recognizable words in any language ever. And we cling to these words, often in life's most vulnerable times, they well up from someplace deep within us.

But it's important that we keep in mind the context in which these words were written. Of course these are our words, we've scrawled them on keepsakes, blankets, bookmarks, and pictures of sheeps walking safely next to hairy sandal clad legs or draped over shoulder. But before they were our words, these were Israelite words.

Remember from the story of Jacob who wrestles with God in Genesis 32. In his overcoming of “the angel” Jacob is given a new name, the name Israel, because he struggled with God. Israel is a people who struggled for a home, for security, for justice and for peace. As David wrote this Psalm he was on the run for his life from a King who was threatened by him and wanted him dead. So he spent years, as God’s chosen and anointed King running from one place of hope of security to another. David struggled with God.

We, no doubt, can relate to this. We have all struggled with God. Sometimes we struggle to know God’s will for our lives, what job should I pursue, whom should I pursue, what area of study should I pursue? Sometimes we struggle with questions on a more existential level, does God even exist? Or one that’s close to home for us, why are we going through one after another challenging circumstance? We all struggle with God.

Israel struggled with their faith in the God who was with them. Life for the Israelites on the road with God was often very difficult. Sometimes it was so hard that they struggled to believe that God was still a part of their lives. And like each one of us, it was out of that place of *in*security that they wandered away from God and wandered toward other gods of their own making. Gods that would be more manageable and predictable. The gods of work, of leisure; the gods of comfort or sex; the gods of money and the gods of individuality. But all this did was lead them down more and more difficult and treacherous roads, filled with lament and woe.

So, generation after generation we have turned to Psalm 23 for the green pastures and the still waters it promises, on the broad open and flat places of our lives. When everything is as it should be. It would be fine with us if we just skipped over verse 4. We don’t really want the highs and lows of life on the peaks and in the valleys. These are not the places we plan to inhabit, no one does, which is why we so often think that the green pastures and quiet waters are there because we’ve made all the right moves and orchestrated our lives all by ourselves.

Those of you who are fans of Stranger Things know that Will Byers doesn’t plan his little jaunts through the Upside Down.

Sooner or later the Mind Flayer, or whatever the enemy looks like comes to threaten the safety and security we have tried to build around us. It may look like disease, job loss, family conflict, or a car wreck. The enemy may be the looming suspicion that a terrorist will walk in through the doors of another church and hurt us. The wolf’s job is to confuse, disrupt, scatter, and scare the sheep. So instead of wrestling with God in faith, we are more content to surround ourselves with security measures, we work harder and become more vigilant.

Last weekend was another horrific example of how lost and broken our society is, there is no other way to describe it. We are lost. But what was even more disheartening is having public figures advocate for church members to begin carrying guns with them to church. I will never advocate for this from you. All we are doing is trying to capture the green pastures of security without wrestling with the God who leads us there (notice: leads us there, not walks alongside us while we find the way).

People talk about being scared stiff. I don’t think we get scared stiff, I think we get scared crazy. So often what happens in situations like this is we don’t become stiff and cautious, we crank the energy

level and irrationality up to 12. We run when we are lost, and that is how we damage our relationships even further.

We run because we have allowed the enemy to intimidate us, we have more faith in our fear of the Mind Flayer than we do in the Shepherd who takes us by the hand and leads us through the dark valleys. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.

Psalm 23 reminds us that in spite of our best efforts to shield our lives from the enemy, we invariably will face his arrows at one time or another. But those are the moments is when we call upon the promises of the Good Shepherd who doesn't promise that we will never face those moments, but who does promise that he will be near to us when we do.

As I've reflected on the events of last week, I like many of you, have been so discouraged by the state of our nation, but I've been more discouraged by some of the knee-jerk responses that perpetuate this condition of fear.

In the early church, God's people lived on a daily basis with the very real fear that today might be their last. In Rome, Christians were fed to the lions in the Coliseum by the hundreds almost on a daily basis, for the amusement of onlookers. And do you know what these small communities of vulnerable believers did, they didn't prepare to fight back, they didn't arm themselves. They engaged in the sacred liturgies of worship and sacrament. They baptized their babies, they baptized their children, they told and retold the story of a savior who once told a parable about a Good Shepherd who went out after even one lost sheep. They remembered how he, on the night of his betrayal and arrest, gathered around a table breaking bread and drinking wine with his friends saying this is a foretaste of the royal feast you will share with me in the kingdom of heaven, this is my body. They remembered how that same Jesus was crucified and buried in a tomb, but three days later resurrected from the dead. Dead flesh, now alive, not metaphorically, not spiritually, literal actual new life, resurrected life. Death and the enemy thought they had won, but the great gotcha of all time, God said not so fast.

So when these people baptized their babies in Jesus name and into his death, they also baptized them into his resurrection. They put each other to death, and then raised each other to new life. And my friends there is no wolf, there is no demigorg, there is no devil, or disease that can frighten dead people. We don't scare. Because we've been there, with Christ we've stared death in the face, and watched as Jesus holds out the nail-printed hands. Death, that's old news. When you know that your life is alive in Christ nothing can scare you. And that means that valleys, shadows, tough times are mere opportunities for the Good Shepherd to be who he promises to be, Emmanu-el, God with us.

The great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon has this wonderful quote: "Those who navigate little streams and shallow creeks, know but little of the God of the tempests; but those who do business in the great waters see his wonders in the deep. Among the huge Atlantic waves of bereavement, poverty, temptation, and reproach, we learn the power of Jehovah because we feel the littleness of ourselves." You cannot enjoy the still waters until you have done time on the stormy seas where you find the faithfulness of the God who makes you at peace with all of life.

All of this, all of this is infinitely relevant to this subject of stewardship and generosity. Security, comfort, peace, try as we might to manufacture it and control it on our own, will only lead us further from God. When you recognize that every good gift comes from the hand of the father, and is merely passing through en route to someone else, then you realize that the true joy of generosity. In seeing not how wisely and shrewdly you can make your money work for you, but how extravagantly you can make it work for others by giving it away. Only then you will see that life and peace is present in the green pastures and dark valleys alike, because the shepherd is with us. The one we will proclaim in a few weeks to be Emmanu-el, God with us. Jesus our Good Shepherd.

Amen.

Luther: It is as if he would say: As for me, I am indeed weak, sad, anxious, and surrounded by all kinds of danger and misfortune. Because of my sin, my heart and my conscience are not satisfied either. I experience such horrible terrors of death and hell that I almost despair. Yet though the whole world and also the gates of hell should oppose me, that will not dismay me. Yes I will not be afraid of all the evil and sorrow that they may be able to lay on me; for the Lord is with me. The Lord is my counselor, comforter, protector, and helper—the Lord, I say, who has created heaven and earth and everything that is in it out of a more trifling thing than a speck of dust, that is, out of nothing. To him all creation is subject: angels, devils, men, sin, death, etc; in brief, He has everything in his power. And therefore I fear no evil.

Martin Luther on Psalm 23