

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Lord is Our Shepherd: Paying Attention to Grammar”
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Psalm 23

We continue our sermon series on the 23rd Psalm, and today our focus is on verse 4: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” We also continue what I refer to as our “beginner’s class on sheep and shepherding” ... which adds to the richness and understanding of the psalm.

As we know, sheep need to be kept on the move while grazing, so they don’t deplete an area. And shepherds would wisely work around the seasons as they traveled between valleys and mountains.

Although we are reading the poetic King James Version of the psalm which says “valley of the shadow of death”, a better translation of the Hebrew is actually, “the darkest valley”.

Valleys were not the safest of places for sheep. Though we usually think of them as peaceful and relaxing ... valleys were known to have floods and rock slides. Surrounded by hills and mountains, and filled with foliage, they contained plenty of dark shadows and places of cover. This gave the various animals of prey plenty of opportunity to hide while they waited to strike ... and sheep are very vulnerable animals.

A good shepherd knew this, of course, and would always be on the watch. He would use his rod, which is like a club, to hit or throw at animals who tried to attack his sheep. He would also sometimes throw it toward a wayward sheep to get it to change course and rejoin the group. And the shepherd would use his staff to hook a sheep that got stuck in the thorns or fell into a river... and pull it to safety.

“The Lord is my shepherd” ... This beautiful and comforting psalm is a tribute to God’s guidance, protection, and faithfulness. And while we so often hear it read at a funeral or memorial service, this psalm is not really about death. The 23rd psalm is about a life lived in relationship with God. And it promises us that God is with us as we walk through the darkest of valleys.

I am privileged to know most of you in this congregation ... and even more privileged that several of you have shared your stories with me. And one thing I can say for certain: you have had your share of dark valleys. That is an inevitable part of this thing called life. And so we turn our focus to the title of this sermon ... “Paying Attention to Grammar.”

I ask you all now to look at our scripture reading in your bulletin. Notice that the first part of the psalm claims that the Lord is the writer’s shepherd ... but talks about the shepherd in the third person. “He maketh; He leadeth; He restoreth.”

Now, in verse 4, there is a subtle but significant shift to the second person: “for thou art with me.” “Thou” ... meaning “You”. The writer is claiming personal knowledge of, trust in, and relationship with the Lord. It has become intimate. The writer is saying, “Not only do I know about you ... but I know that you know me.” And you are with me.

Go up one more line. For the real crux of this verse is the word, “through.” And in that one preposition lies an enormous promise. God does not leave us in that dark valley, unless we choose to stay there. The darkest valley is not a permanent dwelling place. It doesn’t last forever. It is a place we walk (not run) through to get somewhere else.

And although it may be unsettling or painful ... it also contains treasures. Just as the valley may flood; may have dangerous animals; may have rock slides-- it is also where the sheep find some of the freshest water to drink and some of the greenest grass to eat... both of which strengthen them.

The shepherd stays with the sheep, so they need not fear.

And our shepherd stays with us ... so that we need not fear.

I was at Fox Run retirement community this past Wednesday, and was talking with a woman who is in a very dark valley right now. As I listened, she went on to say that she had faith in God to be with her through the darkness. That when she looked back on previous “dark valley experiences”, she could see God’s faithfulness and how God was at work in her life, shaping her into the person she is today. What an attitude. What faith. What understanding.

For the darkest valleys are where we learn the deepest lessons. Over and over and over, scripture tells us not to be afraid. We will face hard times... we will walk through dark valleys... but God has promised to be with us through it all. We need not fear.

In 2013, a man named Mike Livingstone suffered a brain aneurysm, and he blogged about it during his recovery. This is an adapted version of one of his entries:

Nighttime in the ICU was the worst. Long, sleepless, uncomfortable nights. During one of those nights, in one of my worst and weakest moments, I lay in bed recalling some favorite Bible passages. I needed a word from God. My mind turned to Psalm 23 and I silently recited the words ... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me ... for you are with me ... you are with me...

What came next? For you are with me ... I couldn’t remember the next line. Likely from a combination of heavy-duty painkillers, fatigue, and brain trauma, I couldn’t recall what came after for you are with me. I kept trying. For you are with me ... for you are with me ... but my mind was blanking out.

In that moment God spoke, not audibly, but God’s word to me was unmistakable: What else do you need to know? I am with you. That’s all you need.

A peace washed over me, and I repeated again, this time in a triumphant declaration of faith: You are with me! You are with me! You are with me! That was all I needed to know.

Psalm 23, this beautiful psalm of a life lived in close, intimate relationship with God, is not just something for us to hang on to as we walk through dark valleys. It is a connection with God we should strive for every day of our lives ... whether we are in a dark valley ... or on a mountaintop.

And so, our challenge this week is to ask ourselves:

- Do I put my trust in God, so that I need not fear when I am in a dark valley?
- How do I shine a light in the darkness for others who are in a dark valley?