

Sermon

Sunday, August 18, 2019

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ Psalm 23:1-6 and John 1:-7-18

The Good Shepherd in the Valley of the Shadow

The Rev. Al Zadig Jr.

I remember it like it was yesterday. I was in New York City at the bedside of a St. Michaelite ravaged with cancer. We were in Sloan Kettering Hospital. On this particular afternoon, the family was taking a break and so I was alone in the room with our dear friend Louisa, just talking and praying. And that's when it happened. The doctor came in and thought I was Louisa's husband. I didn't have my collar on, it was an honest mistake. And before I can stop him the doctor says, "'Louisa, I'm glad to see you both alone. I have bad news for you. This cancer is aggressive. You have one to two weeks.'" The diagnosis was accurate, and our dear friend died several days later. The only words I could find to describe such pain were those from Psalm 23, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."

Valley – bottom. Shadow – darkness, because something is literally blocking the light.
Death – life is forever changed.

King David, you were an old man when you wrote Psalm 23, you knew the midnights, the valleys and shadows. You, David, who went from lowly shepherd of sheep, to a war champion and King, to a man who betrayed his world in the midnight of adultery. David, you knew the valleys of which you wrote. You lost not one but two sons to pre-mature death.

My friends, David writes Psalm 23 knowing that the Valley of the Shadow of Death is both a season in our life as well as a real geographical area. The physical valley starts in Jerusalem, going twenty-one miles southeast all the way to the Dead Sea, a narrow and dangerous valley of the shadows. Just imagine the sheep making their way through it. For starters, sheep have no sense of direction. Unlike a dog or cat that always knows how to get

home, not so with sheep! No inner compass! And because of all their wool, sheep will not drink from moving streams, since they know they can't swim in a current. Therefore, they will only drink from still water. Sheep also have very poor eyes, with bad depth perception, so they can't see things immediately in front of their noses. So falling is a real danger, and if they fall on their side, they literally can't get up. When sheep fall, they flail with legs in the air, bleating and crying. After a few hours on their backs, gas begins to collect in their stomachs. As the stomach hardens, the air passage is cut off and the sheep can eventually suffocate. More than you wanted to know, but shepherds call this the cast-down position.

My friends, we aren't all that different! We can lose our sense of direction, when we lose our inner compass. The currents that surround us can overtake us! We often don't see what God sees. And yes, sometimes we feel upside down in life, like that cast-down sheep, and can't get back up!

Humanly speaking, Sloan Kettering was my Valley, and in that valley I felt like a cast-down sheep. David wrote Psalm 23 to tell us sheep that God, our Shepherd, is still in charge. He is sufficient. He can be counted on! The Lord is my Shepherd. He leads me besides the still waters to restore my soul. I wonder if you need to hear that again today? God is in charge!
If you've ever felt like a direction-less cast down sheep, Psalm 23 is your Psalm.

But Psalm 23 is more than that. In the last four weeks, we've had four really hard funerals. And in the last four weeks, we've also seen out of control violence. Human wolves stalking fellow humans, from El Paso to Dayton to Hanover Street, a mile from

here. I don't have to tell you that the valley of the shadow is a real place.

But in Psalm 23 David gives us four reasons we don't need to fear the valleys. I will fear no evil. Why? First, the word my. The Lord isn't just 'a' shepherd, the Lord is MY Shepherd, thou art with me. This is intensely personal! It's not just cold doctrine. My shepherd with me in the valley.

I think of the story of two Scottish ministers in the highlands of Scotland. While hiking, they met a shepherd boy and start to chat with him. To their amazement, the boy knew nothing of Christianity. So they read and explain Psalm 23 to help him find a personal faith. They get him to repeat five words on five fingers: The Lord is My Shepherd. The next winter, the ministers come back to hike, and looking for something hot to drink, they stop in at a cottage to ask for tea. But on the mantle, they notice a picture of the boy they saw the year before, and ask where he was. The owner of the cottage says, "The wee boy died earlier this year in a snowstorm while tending sheep and froze to death. But when they found him, his right hand was holding the fourth finger of his left hand." The ministers look at each other in amazement and tell the woman, "We taught him the 23rd Psalm and told him whenever he said it to himself, to pause at the fourth word, the fourth finger, MY."

No Fear, Why? My shepherd is with me! Second, thy rod will comfort me. Shepherds always had a rod, a four foot long oak club. The club had two purposes, to protect the sheep from the wolves by literally beating them away, and to count the sheep to make sure not one was lost. I will fear no evil. Why? The Lord is MY

Shepherd. HE fights for me using the rod; I am counted, I am HIS!

And third, He fights for me using his staff. Thy rod AND thy staff they comfort me. The staff was six to eight feet long, and at the end of the staff was a curly hook, used by the shepherd in the peaks and valleys when the sheep lost their footing. With the staff, the shepherd could reach down, place the hook under the small chest of the sheep and lift it onto the pathway. Have you ever felt lifted out of a valley? The Staff is God's grace, pulling us back from despair. The Rod is God's power.

And fourth, I shall fear no evil because of the promise of home. David promising, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever!" It's the promise of home. just as the sheep would come into the pen each night protected by the shepherd, we the people will one day dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.

No fear. Why? The Lord is MY Shepherd. Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever!!

Oh, but it gets even better! Fourteen generations after David, the shepherd of all shepherds would be born. David's great grandson by fourteen: Jesus. In John 10, Jesus is called The Good Shepherd. In Hebrews 13, Jesus is called The Great Shepherd. In 1 Peter 5, Jesus is called The Chief Shepherd. An earthly shepherd can be personal, defend the sheep, save the sheep from falling, and call them in each night. But only Jesus, the Good, Great, and Chief Shepherd, can bring us, the sheep, back to life again for all eternity! Jesus brings the eternal dimension. We don't have to fear our valleys. Why? Jesus died for each of us personally. Jesus is MY Shepherd. MY Father who art in heaven. So personal and eternal!

And Yes, Jesus fights for us! Jesus with his rod defends us. With his staff, He lifts us into eternity, promising that all who believe in Him will live forever at home with him! Jesus as our shepherd died to protect us from the evil one, dying, taking our sin within, and by doing so has won for us everlasting life. Jesus is fighting for you!

Here is yet another dimension. In his classic book, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, Phillip Keller writes that, "The Rod

Jesus gives us is the Bible, its the rod of God's word." Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. The Bible as God's Rod and Word yes, comforts us in our fear. The Bible as God's rod and word also is a defense against the wolves. It was Jesus who used that rod in his valley. Remember when Jesus was tempted four times by Satan in the Judean Desert? Each time Jesus ended his reply using the rod: It is written. And Satan departed. The bible is our rod against the enemy; to know it is comfort and self-defense.

Keller then says the staff represents the Holy Spirit. Like the shepherd's crook, the Holy Spirit has the power to lift us out of the valleys, and to sustain us and deliver us home!

The Staff is the Holy Comforter, the Holy Spirit, drawing us together out of the valleys.

No fear, we've been given the rod of the Word of God, the Staff of the Spirit!

So, let's take a step back. David goes from shepherd of the sheep to Kingly shepherd of the people, and through his line, Jesus is born to be chief shepherd to save us all eternally. You and I are of that same line, direct sons and daughters of the shepherd Jesus. As such, and here's the turn, you and I are called to be understudy shepherds. We are to shepherd the sheep Jesus has given us. Yes as clergy, we are understudy shepherds. Edwin and Duval are understudy shepherds to the acolytes. We have over 25 children and adult Sunday School teachers who are understudy shepherds. Small Group leaders are understudy shepherds. Lay Eucharistic ministers are understudy shepherds. Every Christian is actually called to be an Understudy Shepherd under the authority of the Good Shepherd to another!

My friends, we live in an era of unprecedented enemies; wolves and hyenas are out there in the form of predators. Understudy shepherds are needed now, right here, to teach the intimacy of Jesus, the power of the Rod of the word, the Strength of the Spirit as our staff, and the promise of home!

This week is a going to a very emotional one for the Zadig family, and for me personally, as we take our second child to college. I have to say as my son's understudy shepherd, that I have asked Jesus a thousand times, "Have I done enough with the rod of Scripture and the staff of the Spirit to prepare him for this

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part of his life?" To the Wilson family, as we baptize Mary Oliver in a minute. Cooper and Mary McArthur, you will be asked if you will dedicate yourselves as understudy shepherds, seeing that Mary Oliver knows her eternal shepherd. You will be asked to provide the rod in the form of The Lord's Prayer, The Ten Commandments, and the seeds of faith for Mary Oliver. Mary Oliver, like every one of us, will in her life feel like a cast down sheep in the valley of the shadows. The job of parents and godparents, our job, understudy shepherds of St. Michael's, is to equip her and all our children to go through those valleys with no fear.

My friends, if you're in the valley of the shadows, know Jesus as your shepherd is fighting for you and has given you the Rod and Staff. Cry out to Him, he is YOUR Shepherd. He is enough! But realize, you are to simultaneously be understudy shepherds in your home and workplace.

Finally, I remember so well, one such understudy shepherd - my Grandfather, my mother's father, Christian Williamson. He loved his Shepherd Jesus so much. I remember so well sitting on his lap with him as he taught me to memorize the rod of Psalm 23, to get me through the valleys and the Sloan Ketterings. What I didn't tell you though was that he had been confined to a wheel chair for the last ten years of his life. Yet even from his own valley, his love for Jesus changed me. From his own valley, he was my understudy shepherd. On his lap I learned the intimacy of our Shepherd Jesus, the power of the Rod of the word, the strength of the Staff of the Spirit, and the promise of home!

Psalm 23. Henry Ward Beecher called you the Nightingale of the Psalms because the Nightingale sings its sweetest when night is darkest. Join me as an understudy shepherd.

Let us pray.