

Walking through a Dark Valley

[Psalms 23](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes
Sunday, May 26, 2002

[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

Even when you walk with God, you'll eventually have to pass through a dark valley. We could also say because you walk with God, you will eventually have to pass through a dark valley.

The 23rd Psalm is most familiar and beloved of all the psalms. When you hear the words, "The Lord is my Shepherd," memories rush to the surface. Some of you recall childhood Sunday school class where this psalm was committed to memory. Others remember the funeral of a loved one where this psalm was repeated in unison as an act of worship. In more than one crisis the words of this psalm have tumbled out of your lips precisely because it was a crisis and you just didn't know what else to do. The words just emerged from someplace deep in your soul.

We know this psalm. It has led us in the paths of comfort all the days of our lives. But sometimes it is the things closest to us that are the most difficult to hear. Remember, long before this psalm was used by the church, it was a cherished hymn of the Hebrews. While it also belongs to us, it was first an expression of Jewish faith, and to grasp its real power we need to recall their history with God.

They were a people called Israel, which means "Those who struggle with God." They struggled for a home they were always trying to get into, hold onto, or get back to. They struggled for food and water, for peace and justice, and for a future. Most of all, they struggled for their faith in God.

The Hebrews longed to live with God, like sheep live with a shepherd, but their lives were hard. It was so hard they often couldn't believe this Shepherd was leading them to green pastures, or that goodness and mercy would follow them all the days of their lives. So out of fear they frequently fled the shepherd and rushed down more promising paths toward more manageable gods, But that always led them into unmanageable trouble and to laments for the salvation of the true God. When they returned to worship, they would tell this great story over and over again in some of these great hymns.

So it is not surprising that so many of the Psalms describe the churning, disruptive experience of being lost and found, judged and forgiven, sent away and brought back. It is all a part of the pathos of a people who got scared and lost their way, and the high drama of a God who searches to find his lost sheep.

Therefore, the last thing we ought to be doing is rushing to the 23rd Psalm to be reminded everything is okay. It was never about that. We're drawn to the images of green pastures, still waters, and an overflowing cup because, unlike the Hebrews, we are a people who strive for equilibrium, security, and a little abundance. But we want it all on the flat planes in the middle of life. We don't particularly care for the highs and lows of Israel, their insatiable thirst on long desert journeys, or their maddening love affair with God. It all sounds a bit reckless.

Besides, most of us think that we have made it to the green pastures on our own, by being careful and by working very hard. But sooner or later a day comes when a wolf invades your carefully cultivated life. The wolf may arrive as a terrible disease, a lost job, or a late night phone call from a child in trouble. The wolf may be the terrorist we know is out there, somewhere, waiting for an opportunity to hurt us again. On the day that the wolf comes, like frightened sheep, like the Hebrews before us, we find more passion and drama in our lives than we care to have. We take off in search of a safer pasture. We work harder, and we try to become even more careful.

Occasionally, you hear about someone being scared stiff, but as a pastor I have discovered when people

are really frightened they don't become stiff. They run like crazy. I don't know where they are running. I don't know what they're going to try next, but I know that when they are really afraid, they're going to turn the pace of life up to level ten, trying to find safety again. In the words of Rollo May, "Humans are the strangest of all creatures, because they run fastest when they have lost their way." That, of course, is how we get into real trouble -- running when we are lost. It is how we make our biggest mistakes with relationships, health, work, and certainly with God.

We run because we have allowed the wolf to scare us, and because we have more faith in the wolf than we have the shepherd. The wolf is not the problem! The fear is our great problem. The illusion that we can find a safe pasture is our problem. The problem is that we are not focused on the Shepherd. "Thou art with me," David says in this Psalm. If you believe that, if you can see it, you're not going to worry about the wolf. Helping you see the Good Shepherd is just one of the reasons God created wolves.

The Psalms, none more than the 23rd, invite you to depart from your illusions about a carefully constructed little life to move out into the open, to the frightening truth, where you have no choice but to call upon the God of our salvation. That's your only security. It doesn't matter where you run, or how high a wall you build around your little pasture, the wolf will always find you. So our great hope in this life comes not by trying to escape the wolf, but by trusting in the Shepherd who is always near.

When we baptized those little babies earlier today, we did so in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is nothing better we can do for them. In that baptism we are declaring that these babies belong to the Father who created them, the Son who has found them, and the Holy Spirit who has adopted them into the Triune family. All three persons of that Trinity function together as this Good Shepherd. This means that everything necessary for our babies' salvation from the wolves has already been accomplished, before they really begin life, before they even know enough to be frightened, the Good Shepherd has claimed them as his own.

The reason we bring them under this Triune covenant is that we want them to grow up unafraid of the adventure of life. We want them to inherit a real life, and to know the freedom that comes to those who believe, "Thou art with me."

If they know that, they can grow up to seize life as it really is. They can cry tears of grief because they are not afraid of pain. They can laugh loudly because they are not afraid that joy is fleeting. They can enter into the pathos of the poor and the thirsty, and they can drink from the cup that overflows with abundance. They can live! Fully alive! Because they are not wasting their fleeting years as frightened sheep without a shepherd.

If you believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, if you have claimed your baptismal inheritance, you can live your life in the heights and depths knowing that the Triune God has already secured salvation. Goodness and mercy will indeed follow you all of the days of your life -- even the dark days, the days when you cannot see God, the days when the world is not treating you like the beloved child of the Father in heaven.

It is precisely because the Spirit has adopted you into the Son's relationship with the Father that the Triune God calls you to live as his own Son lived upon this earth. Jesus refused to tend his own little garden in Nazareth, but leaving the places of security, he entered into the high drama of salvation.

In the words of Charles Spurgeon, "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.

We live with insecurity by discovering he is secure. We live with doubt by discovering he has no doubts. We live with storms by discovering that he is the one who controls the seas. We live with the darkest of valleys by discovering, "Thou art with me."

That is how David survived the valley of the shadow of death when Saul tried to kill him, and it is how hope rises out of the rubble of collapsed towers in New York and the wounded side of the Pentagon. Believing God is with us is how relief workers survive another day of caring for the homeless in Afghanistan, how the Palestinian church continues to call for peace on the West Bank, and how huddled Christians continue to worship in countries where the church is persecuted. It is even how middle class Americans survive lifestyles that tear them in a hundred different directions.

There it is again: the churning, disruptive experiences of a people who keep discovering that their only hope is in the Shepherd who is always the closest thing to them.

O Thou our Good Shepherd, it is all up to you. So give us the vision of the Spirit, to see the Son, who alone brings us home to the Father. Amen.