



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

“Valleys of Shadows, Light of Life”

Psalm 23

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. ⁴ 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.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶ 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.

Ephesians 5: 8-14

⁸ For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— ⁹ for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰ Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³ but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴ for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,

and Christ will shine on you.”

The first text that I memorized from the Bible was the 23rd psalm. Almost everyone knows it, and it is the most requested scripture at the time of a funeral. Why? Because it captures the realism of life and the hope of faith. Life is filled with blessings and good things. Life is replete with moments of joy. Times of celebration and happiness. Indeed, with the psalmist, we can proclaim that in our lives, our “cup overflows” with the goodness of God.

But life is also characterized by dark moments, sadness, doubt, and fear. The brightest day casts long shadows, and they often blanket our lives like a pall. Light and shadows: Today I want to examine this tension. First by looking closer at Psalm 23. Second I want to look at this well known Psalm in terms of our contemporary life. Finally, I want to juxtapose it with a New Testament text from the Letter to the Ephesians.

Psalm 23 is a metaphor that people in the ancient mid-east would understand. The God of the bible, who is unknowable, vast, powerful and wholly other, is one whom generations have understood in terms of metaphors: father, king, fortress, true vine, and defender.... in this case a shepherd. A rural agrarian culture understood this metaphor in all its rich complexity.

The psalmist first reflects on the wonderful gifts that God gives to each and all of us. God is such a caring shepherd that none of us want for anything. We have all we need. Green pastures: we have food. Still water: our thirst is quenched: We are restored when we are weak: the good shepherd knows the way through the tangles of life and leads us down those paths. These are the awesome blessings of life. But as I mentioned, the psalmist is realistic. Life is not always a bowl of cherries.

There are the valleys of the shadows in all of our lives. There are times when we find ourselves in difficult situations. There are times when we are depressed or filled with sorrow. It may be a moment of grief, having lost a loved one.. or the grief that accompanies change. It may be a physical condition that causes pain, it may be the loss of a job...a broken relationship. These are real moments in our lives. They are moments when we are left with the loose ends. They are the moments when we shake our fist at the heavens and ask “Why?” These are the times when we are face to face with our own finiteness. The psalmist acknowledged the reality of these moments in spite of the rich blessings of life.

The Hebrew people believed that there existed a valley of death which they called *Gehanna*. This was the *valley of the shadow*, a place where one could sense the presence of evil. This was the valley of the shadow that the Psalmist wrote about. Their sheep were not aggressive animals and were preyed upon by other beasts. They were very vulnerable. There were times when the shepherd would have to move the sheep from one grazing area to another. This might involve going through an area, a valley if you will, where predators lay in wait. The shepherds rod and staff would protect the sheep. The rod was used to fight off predators. The staff brought the wandering sheep back to the fold and safety. “thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

The Hebrew people knew this valley of the shadow well. It was the place of despair. It was the place where good does not seem to triumph. It was all the places in life where justice seems absent and fairness non-existent.

There is a valley of the shadow that all of us experience at one time or another. The psalmist assures us that even there, we are not alone. God is with us.

II

I remember the moment that this psalm came alive for me.. When it was more than something to memorize in Sunday School. It was early in my ministry, and without going into too much detail, it was not a very good time. Studies indicate that nearly 50% of all clergy leave the ministry in the first five years and I believe that I understand why. We graduate from seminary filled with high expectations and visions. We believe we will preach and people will want to hear what we have to say. We envision our congregations swelling with people, hungry for the good news and the message of hope we bring. The call to ministry is like falling in love. Like all lovers, there comes a moment when you wake up and wonder what you’ve got yourself into. Ministry is not an easy calling, and I was just discovering this reality and I was in pain and doubt.

I have never been a good letter writer, but I phoned my father and shared my tales of woe and despair with him. In retrospect, I know that it must have caused him a great deal of pain also to hear me. I remember very little of the content of that call but about a week later I received a letter from him and in it he delivered some of the most sage advice that a father could give an adult child. He wrote about this Psalm and stated two things, both emphasizing the prepositions: *through* and *with*.

First, we go through the valley, and second, God is with us. The valley of the shadow, the times of pain, sorrow and depression are always finite. Like a geographical valley, they have end. One goes through those valleys. The experience of the valley of the shadow is real for us all, but in the midst of the darkness of that valley we need to remember that there is an end to it, and that we do go through it. We are journeying through, not settling in there.

God is uniquely with us in those times. That is probably the hardest thing for us to realize and know, because it is precisely then that we feel so far from God. It is precisely then that God seems to be absent in our lives. We feel abandoned and alone. The psalmist affirms those feelings, but states the reality that we are not alone, God is with us. Perhaps so near we cannot even see God.

The loneliness of the valley of the shadow is real. I am intimate with loneliness, but I also know that one of the gifts of God is the transforming power that takes loneliness and creates solitude... Time with God.

There is a corporate dimension to the valley of the shadow. I love Abraham Lincoln and am moved by the power of his leadership. Scholars suggest that he possessed a melancholy personality and might have been given to periods of depression. He was the president of our country when we, as a nation, were in the valley of the shadow. We were fighting with each other, killing one another with both sides invoking God and justice: a national valley of death and destruction. In his second inaugural address, Lincoln articulated, perhaps on the basis of his own intimacy with sorrow and melancholy, the presence of God and his hope for the nation in the midst of this dark historic valley of civil war. His words are almost sacred and should be part of our national canon.

III

The letter to the Ephesians does not speak of valleys of the shadow, but rather of light and life. That too is a reality that we need to remember. It alludes to Jesus' words; "you are the light of the world." It reminds us that in the midst of darkness and shadows, our own and others, we are called to bring the light of hope and the light of life.

I know that in my father's letter fulfilled that for me. He brought light life and hope to me. I believe Lincoln was able to do this for the nation... And my prayer is that your future pastor will be able to do that for this congregation, but more, enable Poland Presbyterian Church to be light for this community.

Let us be realistic. The future is not completely rosy; there will be darkness and shadows, pain and sorrow. There will be moments of doubt and times when our souls are wounded. Yet in those dark times, the light of life, the light of Christ can shine. God is indeed present, and they are only temporary. We go through those times. There have been those lights of life in your life and mine... We are challenged to be those lights to others and the world amidst the valleys and the shadows.... Amen.