

A Sheep's Eye View
Psalm 23
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Well, for what I hope is our last pre-recorded sermon, I thought I would pick an obscure Bible passage that none of us have ever heard before and see what God has to say through it. Seriously, Psalm 23 is one of the most beloved passages of all times, and of all the funerals I've done, I can't remember one that didn't include this piece of scripture. This psalm speaks to us at our deepest soul level, whether we are sick, in crisis, or concerned about a loved one. And it speaks to us wherever we are on the continuum of coping: anger, dread, depression, acceptance, grief, or gratitude. This is arguably the best known scripture passage in history.

But familiarity can be a double-edged sword. Sometimes we know the words so well that we don't stop to think about what they mean. This beloved text is so chock full of meaning that I once did a six-week sermon series just on this psalm. So I would now like to preach all six of those sermons for you. Just kidding, I know you still have one more week with the ability to hit the fast-forward button.

This psalm was written by King David, who started life as a shepherd. But it's important to note it's not written from David's perspective; instead, David writes as if a sheep is speaking. The psalm assumes that the person reading it is a follower of God, just as a sheep follows the shepherd, who leads, protects, and cares for the sheep. This psalm gives us a sheep's-eye view of what it means to follow God. For today, I want to focus one part of the psalm that I believe speaks to our lives and our world right now. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me."

This verse occurs about halfway through the psalm at the moment of an important shift. Up to this point in the psalm, life has been good for the sheep. He's talked about what a great shepherd he has and how that shepherd has supplied all his needs. He's talked about how the shepherd helps him find green pastures for food and clean water for drinking. He's said that his shepherd restores his failing health and guides him down good paths.

But notice the pronouns shift. It's no longer third person (he restores my soul); it's now second person (for you are with me). The sheep is no longer boasting across the fence to other sheep; he's now talking directly to his shepherd. That shift makes sense when you consider the simultaneous shift in tone. Life has taken a downward turn; the green pastures have turned into dark valleys. And yet, even when the light is blotted out by shadows, the shepherd is still there, comforting the sheep.

It's amazing how the author of this psalm, King David, used his experience growing up as a shepherd to write these words and tease out the metaphor of God as a shepherd. For example, understanding the shepherd's yearly routines helps explain these verses. Winter was always spent on the safety of the sheep ranch, but as soon the weather started to warm up, the shepherd would begin to lead his flock of sheep up the mountain, following the receding snow to find the greenest grass. As summer wore on, the shepherd would lead his flock further and further up the mountain to the most remote meadows. Then during fall, when the snow started falling on the highest parts of the mountains, the shepherd would begin to lead his sheep back down, ending up back on the sheep ranch

just as winter set in. Then, next spring, the shepherd would start the journey all over again.

During the months away from the ranch, the sheep were completely alone with the shepherd, and their well-being was totally in the shepherd's hands. The sheep trusted the shepherd to lead them up safe paths and to fresh food and water. No matter where they went, they trusted that the shepherd would go with them.

Here's the thing about leading sheep up a mountain: you can't go straight up. It's hard to find boots to fit them. The shepherd would have to take the gentlest grade to get higher up the mountain, which often meant going through valleys. Valleys would be where the best grass and water would be found so that the sheep could be nourished.

But valleys also presented serious dangers to the sheep. It was where predators like wolves would lurk, waiting for a flock to pass into the valley like a woolly dessert cart. Valleys also made the sheep susceptible to sudden and intense storms, rockslides, and avalanches. Valleys were not always safe places to be, but the shepherd knew that the only way to get up the mountain was to go through the valleys.

We can all probably relate to that. I believe within each of us is an idealistic desire to have constant mountaintop experiences with God, when we are able to bask in God's presence and savor God's love free from any dangers, when we can worship without masks and live our lives without fear of illness or violence. But realistically we each know that those mountaintop experiences are few and far between, and the only way to get to them is by going through valleys.

In my counseling class in seminary, we talked about something related to valleys called the "new normal." Life goes along hunky-dory until all of a sudden – bam! – we are hit with a crisis that throws our whole life out of whack – an pandemic, a death, a job loss, a move. Once we get our bearings, what we try to do is to return our life to the normal we had before. But the crisis has fundamentally altered things. Life can never go back to the normal we once knew. What we can do is to try and establish a new normal, created in light of how our life has changed. I have heard many, many people tell me that it was in the midst of the crisis that they experienced God, and that God walked with them out of that crisis and into their new normal.

Notice what the psalm says: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It doesn't say even though I walk into the valley or get mired in the valley. It says through the valley. The implication here is that if God is with us, there are no dead-end streets. We may not be able to see the other side of the valley, but if God has walked with us into it, God will walk with us out of it.

But that's not always much consolation. We don't like valleys, do we? There are shadows there, shadows that remind us of death. We'll pray and plead to avoid the valleys, and kick and scream as we go into them. Why? Maybe we're afraid that things will never be normal again, and the truth is they very well might not be. But in the valley is where we can find unexpected refreshment, and often times where we learn the skills we will need to serve God in the future.

It makes me wonder where we've seen God in the year-long valley of this pandemic. While we are sure things will never be normal again, there have been moments in the midst of the shadows where God has unexpectedly shown up to remind us we are not alone. Maybe it was in time spent quarantined with family, reconnecting with each other rather than just catching glimpses on the way to the next activity. Maybe it was a

reconnection to God through worship, now more available to those who can't always be physically present. Maybe, once all the distractions were removed, it was a re-prioritizing of the things that matter. Where has God shown up in your valley?

The valleys in our lives are not dead ends. God can use even the most painful experience to bring transformation. It is the person who has lost someone who is best able to comfort someone in their grief. The person who can best minister to a broken heart is one who knows how it feels. The best person to walk with someone through a valley is the person who's been in that valley themselves, and can attest that God was there with them. Maybe what God has been doing in you this past year isn't for you, but in order for you to serve someone else.

As we move through the valleys in our lives, there will continue to be predators that will try to steal our joy, to kill our hopes, to snatch from us the reminder that God is with us. But we are reminded by Psalm 23 that we don't walk this road alone. It is in this valley where we can find rest, nourishment, and the presence of our Good Shepherd. There is so much in this world that scares us, whether we want to admit it or not. How comforting it is to know that with the Good Shepherd at our side, we can not only walk through valleys but up mountains. May God protect us in our valleys and provides us mountain-top views of the new normal that awaits.