

Sermon – 4th Easter
Psalm 23 & John 10:11-18
April 22, 2018

“Even Though the Walk is Hard”

The imagery of Psalm 23 is of a Shepherd who is kind and caring. But in the ancient near East, “shepherd” was a title most often associated with kings, and in those days kings were usually not nice men. From the very outset the writer of Psalm 23 is taking liberties with the common assumptions of his age. Hard pressed would a person be in those days to think of any king as the sort of shepherd whose burning concern was for the welfare of others above his own. If that were not enough of a challenge to ancient sensibilities, the writer employs a word translated as “follow” that almost everywhere else in the Old Testament meant “hot pursuit” - as in the intense pursuit of a fleeing soldier by his enemy. The word could almost be translated as “hounded”.

So there you have it - a beloved Psalm, which through the years has conjured images of a gentle walk through the garden or beside a serene lake with a kindly shepherd, is in truth a pretty daring picture of a king who breaks the mold of kings - one who is filled with compassion and charity, yet who pursues those virtues with the vigor of a warrior. Yet Psalm 23 also paints a picture of life as it really is – people, even ones we love - who are not always kind, a world even if we mostly experience it in places like Brookfield, that is not always friendly, and dares suggest that especially in our worst moments we are not alone. In hot pursuit of us is God, relentlessly coming behind to encourage us, beside us to befriend us, and when we’re most vulnerable going before us to show us the way through tomorrow’s most menacing inhabitant - fear. Fear that something or someone can separate us from the pleasure and peace of God’s presence.

Psalm 23 speaks about such days as being “*a very deep valley,*” – which sounds like a cold lonely walk, worsened, at least in the ancient conception of shepherd, with a brooding nipping at our heels, closing in just often enough to say “*you’ll never outlast me.*” But the operative word in this Psalm, often overlooked, that makes this Psalm not a lament but a remarkable, almost militant confession of faith, is the little word “*even.*” It’s a defiant little phrase, the hinge around which this Psalm revolves where, after a confession of faith is made the writer is ready for anything. The Lord, the King of kings is *my* shepherd – and “*even*” though I walk a deep valley right now – even if I feel isolated or vulnerable, even though my own human weakness and the devil’s eagerness to exploit it have joined forces to make my world a dark place, I, yes even I who feel shadow right now and not sunshine - will not fear.

The Psalm writer’s confession is not only that he is not alone – he has the company of the Shepherd whom we Christians recognize in Isaiah 53:3 as “*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*” God is with him – and this God knows a thing or two about shadows. At Christmas time, we welcome to our dark world the one Isaiah called “Immanuel”, which in Hebrew means “*God with us*”. In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul said it this way: “*I am absolutely certain that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the New Testament “The Message”, writes that Romans passage like this; *“None of (life) fazes us, because Jesus loves us. I’m absolutely convinced that nothing – nothing dead or alive, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable – absolutely nothing can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.”* In John 10:11 Jesus, the Jewish kid who grew up on Psalm 23 you can be assured of that, could not have found a clearer way to present who he was to his disciples than this - *“I am the Good Shepherd”*, even if they couldn’t fathom *how* good and until after his resurrection. After which as you recall, he said to them *“Remember I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* And there’s that word again...”even.”

Even if you’d like to fast forward through the stuff on your plate right now that you’d hand off in a New York minute if you could – even if you’d like to rewind and erase that one day, that one decision, that one thing done that you know can’t be undone – even if what that was or is seems like the death of you – the Lord is with you. Sin writes a good commercial for pleasure, but it’s the ultimate bait and switch game – you don’t ever get what pay for. Death bills itself the end of us but the truth is it’s where what we were created for really begins. And the devil probably does live in the details of everyday life – deadlines and commitments and the sense that we’ll never catch up so we’d better bear down - on our calendars that is – the one whose is the fullest wins. Your Shepherd is kind and caring, but don’t tell sin, death and the devil that. On them he’s tough as nails.

But to you, Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd –your Savior who will relentlessly pursue you but only with goodness and mercy. He wouldn’t have said it, unless he meant it. AMEN