

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
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Sermon for September 27, 2009
Lessons: Psalm 23 and Hebrews 11:8-16

WALKING IN FAITH THROUGH THE DARK VALLEY

If only life could be green pastures and still waters – pleasant, safe, and serene. If only the wolves and lions would leave us alone and we could be sheltered from the storms. If only we could know for certain that we were choosing the right paths that would take us to good places in life. But even Psalm 23, an ode to God’s care and guidance throughout our earthly walk and beyond, speaks of the valley of deep darkness, traditionally if inaccurately translated as the “valley of the shadow of death.” Sheep I’m told grow nervous and fearful moving through dark, narrow places where predators might be lurking. Understandably, sheep like to be able to look across the field and see that no threat approaches. In life’s narrow places, there is no escape route, no choice but to keep going forward, but toward what? In the darkness, we cannot see much beyond our next step or two. Our footing feels insecure and our path uncertain. So, often with more faith and hope than certainty, we say, “I fear no evil,” no harm, “because you are with me.”

While elsewhere herders drive their sheep, often with dogs, in that region the shepherd leads them, and the sheep follow because a bond of trust has been formed. The psalm suggests the trusting sheep knows the shepherd will fight off the wolves with his staff and takes comfort in the shepherd’s strength and courage. In that part of the world, sheep actually do know the voice of their shepherd and take reassurance from it.

We, however, are not sheep, and in the mystery of human life, God does not prevent all harm from touching us. We do not walk through this world unscathed. We are the responsible creature, the one God has made to be aware of others’ needs as well as our own. We are earth’s stewards, and so for us life cannot be just a matter of self-preservation, of providing for “me and mine” and seeking shelter. God calls us to go beyond comfort to serve and leave our own serenity to empathize with others’ distress. Sheep graze to live and live to graze and reproduce so more sheep will be protected and shorn for the wool they provide in return for their grass. Human life is more complex, not merely because we have more sophisticated needs and desires than sheep, but because God created us and Christ calls us to serve the cause of redemptive love.

So, we find deeper meanings in the psalm. For a sheep, the appropriate translation might be, after the mention of still waters, “he refreshes me,” meaning with a good drink from those calm, safe watering places. But for a human, the translation becomes, “He restores my soul.”

God wants more for us than comfort and safety so we can live out our days grazing in green pastures. There is an inwardness to human life that needs to be restored by right relationship with God. We need also to be restored by right relationships with other people, and the human community itself needs a great deal of redemption. So, for sheep, it is enough to say, “He leads me by the right paths.” The shepherd knows to pick the safe ways and will not mislead the sheep. We need to trust that God will not mislead us, either, but the proof is not so evident, because for us the “right paths” are translated with the deeper meaning, “paths of righteousness,” and righteousness does not come without cost. It is not mere virtue or personal morality. That’s not righteousness, and it easily becomes self-righteousness which is deadly. Biblically, righteousness concerns our relationships. Love God with all your strength and will, Jesus tells us, and care for your neighbor as for yourself. The paths of righteousness are much harder to recognize and follow than sheep paths between pastures.

As a congregation, as people of faith, we have walked this summer more than usual in the valley of the shadow. Grief and distress have intruded repeatedly into our shared life as well as into personal and family lives. If faith can be sustained only in green pastures beside still waters, we are in trouble. But if we try to reduce faith to rationalizations of the evils life inflicts upon people, then, also, we are in trouble and are being false to God. Finding truth here is difficult indeed, because no path through this darkness and confusion feels right. There is no nice, neat, clean answer that sheds the light of truth upon the ills and evils in our world. In my youth, a folk singing group, the Kingston Trio, sang with lilting cynicism, “What nature doesn’t do to us will be done by our fellow man.”

Surely, the horrors of genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan far overshadow any grief or terror we have ever known. But you know what? That doesn’t help very much in the valley of darkness. Neither the suffering of a child here among us nor the distress of a parent is lessened by the greater suffering and distress over there in Africa. Certainly, the bigger picture might make us think twice about petty complaints and pet peeves, but the destruction of one is grievous. Massive child abuse is evil because each instance of it for one particular child is evil. Cancer is evil because each case hurts and destroys life and plunges love into grief. More is worse because each individual case is horrible in God’s eyes. If one instance did not matter much, then many would not matter, either.

From the outset, we need to accept the fact – faith’s fact – that no answer settles the problem. Any answer, no matter how biblically supported or theologically correct, given easily and without pain thereby becomes false. Jesus did not come only to preach and teach, to tell us the truth of God; he had to give himself willingly to suffering, humiliation, defeat, and death for it to become the truth of God. He did not rationalize human suffering but gave himself to it, with us and for us. All suffering is now united with his suffering, all death with his dying, all injustice with his wrongful conviction. Every child in distress joins and is joined by God’s Son. Every parent who grieves, who cries out in anger and frustration, who collapses in

exhausted worry, joins and is joined by God, who like a father has compassion for his children, who like a mother gathers them in her arms. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” “Mommy, Daddy, make it go away.”

Some things we must not say blithely as though they told the whole truth. We must not say in the face of human suffering that, well, God has a plan and it’s all for the best. Jesus did not treat people’s pain that way – “Grin and bear it; it will make sense bye and bye.” Certainly, if faith always paid off with pain-free serenity, who would not believe? But we must not call the evil someone else suffers a test, as Job’s false friends do to him. Neither can we ease grief and pain by demonizing someone we choose to blame, rightly or wrongly, for the suffering. We can speak out for justice, but only as those who know we ourselves are forgiven the wrongs we have done.

Here’s the best I can say at this time about life’s valleys of deep darkness. We do what love must do as well as we can in faith with the strength we are given. Sometimes it feels like so little against such overwhelming evil. When Jesus teaches us to pray, “Deliver us from evil,” he’s not asking for personal purity apart from all those sinful others; he’s asking for deliverance from all that hurts and destroys, and we are to ask for it together.

The evils people suffer are not supposed to make sense to us. Healing makes sense, justice makes sense, compassion makes the only sense God knows. For these things we pray, and sometimes we are given the grace to work toward them, also.

Will all the suffering, unfairness, and grief be resolved at last in the resurrection we will also share with the Christ who shares our distresses and draws our suffering and death into his own? In a word, *Yes*. But that word of ultimate hope and vindication does not excuse us from caring now in the present; it compels us to care more. Love will not be put on hold; it will not let its grief be explained away; it will suffer until relief comes. Hebrews tries to explain. We live on the journey toward a land not yet seen, a city not yet built. But faith and hope make the vision as real as sight, and they make life valid even though its vindication is seen only by faith and experienced only as hope.

We thank God for the green pastures and still waters. We seek and keep seeking God’s guidance for the right paths because the paths of righteousness are not always clear and well marked by rules or verities. And we try our best to trust God and stay close when we find ourselves in a valley of darkness, surrounded by predators real or imagined, and unable to see beyond our next footstep. But know this. God is still there, even when our faith falters. God will not leave us to the wolves or abandon us to ourselves. Amen.