

Psalm 23:4-6

Last Sunday, Good Shepherd Sunday, we looked at the first three verses of Psalm 23. Today we look at the last part of the Psalm beginning with these words: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me."

A mother collapsed when the news came to her that her son had been killed. She went into her room, closed the door, and refused to see anyone. Her pastor came and sat down by her bedside, but she would not speak to him. There was a period of silence, and then very slowly he began to say, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want..." and she listened. When he came to this verse of comfort, she joined in amid her tears and together they said, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." When they finished, she looked at her pastor and said, "I see it differently now."

It's been said that the 23rd Psalm is the nightingale of the Psalms. The nightingale sings its sweetest when the night is darkest. And for most of us, death is the most terrifying and darkest fact of life. But the Christian; the sheep who follows Jesus the Good Shepherd, is not afraid even of this dark valley. The Shepherd has gone this way before. He knows the way through death; He is the way. And His sheep who know Him and trust Him, need fear no evil.

On Good Friday your Good Shepherd walked into the dark valley. Jesus died on the cross sacrificing His life for the sheep. On Easter Sunday He rose from the dead. He came out of the valley! Jesus had conquered death, and sin, and hell. And now beyond the valley of death lies the Father's home--Paradise--the eternal pastures for Jesus' sheep. Your Savior is not a dead Savior. He rose again. Jesus lives! We are not sheep without a Shepherd. He is your Shepherd. "Thou art with me."

In the land of Palestine, we are told that there is an actual valley that leads from Jerusalem in the mountains down to the Dead Sea below sea level. The path is rough and there is danger that a sheep, at any moment, may fall to its death. It is a foreboding journey that one dreads to take. But the sheep is not afraid. Why not? Because its shepherd is with it. Jesus is your Shepherd who is with you even when you are faced with a foreboding path through life; even when you are faced with death. Like the mother who sat alone in her room, we can react with fear and with depression when we walk through the dark valley. But you are not alone. When your Shepherd's words come to you, He enables you to keep walking; to keep going on your journey, for He goes with you.

Without Jesus we sheep would be lost. We could easily fall. Our enemies would easily devour us. David, therefore, says, "Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me." The shepherd in the Holy Land carried a rod--a heavy, hard club something like a baseball bat which, in his hands, was a deadly weapon, and which he could throw with great accuracy. With it he would defend his sheep against marauding wild beasts. He also carried a staff which was about eight feet long. Its end was turned into a crook, as you see in the window. If a sheep had lost its footing and had fallen into a crevice or onto a ledge, the shepherd could reach down and lift it back up with the crook of his staff.

"Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me." Just as a sheep is comforted by the tools of its shepherd, so we are comforted by the tools of our Good Shepherd. His Word and Sacraments, like a heavy rod, defend us against our enemies, and He uses His Law and His Gospel to lift us back to Him when we fall. Oftentimes we take our eyes off of our Good Shepherd, and we fall into the cracks and crevices

of sin. God's Law rebukes us for going our own sinful way. It shows us that we have earned God's eternal wrath; that we do not deserve any blessings from Him; and that we need Him, for we are helpless without Him. But His Gospel is His word of forgiveness. It is the word of Christ upon the cross bearing your sin and punishment. It is the word of grace giving you not what you and I deserve, but peace with God and life in Jesus' name. Through this word of forgiveness, your Good Shepherd lifts you out of your sins and sets you back in His arms of love and mercy.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." Jesus knows that we, His sheep, are surrounded by dangers and temptations, and so He prepares a table for us. In the Holy Land poisonous plants which were fatal to the sheep grew in the pastures. There were also plants with sharp thorns which could injure the tender nose of the sheep. Each spring, therefore, the shepherd would take his mattock and dig out these enemies of the sheep, pile them up, and burn them. In this way the pastures were made safe for the sheep to graze. The pasture became a table prepared for the sheep.

Jesus does the same thing for us. Through parents He protects children from their enemies. Children are taught rules of safety, and are warned of all kinds of dangers. They are immunized against diseases. Christian parents watch for the poisons in book, magazines, on television, in movies, and on the internet which could hurt these little lambs. Christian parents, along with other Christians, teach children the Word of God, being in that Word themselves, and bring their little ones to regularly hear God's Word. Through all this our Good Shepherd is working to prepare a table for us His sheep in which He feeds us from the pastures of His grace.

In the Holy Land, every evening when the shepherd brought his sheep back to the sheepfold for the night, he would stand at the gate and stop each sheep as it passed through. He would look especially for cuts and scratches on the face and head. He would then apply soothing oil to help heal these injuries. "Thou anointest my head with oil." Do not ever think that you are neglected or overlooked by your God. You may have cuts and scratches, some of which are very deep. Here in the sheepfold there is soothing oil for your injuries. Each one of you is precious to God. His words of healing are for every one of you. No injury is too great for Him to heal. No cut is too deep for His oil to soothe. Every comforting word of grace which is spoken here by your Good Shepherd, is spoken to each one of you. His words are the oil which anoint your head and heal your wounds.

At the gate of the sheepfold in the Holy Land there was also a large earthen jug of water kept cool by evaporation. As the sheep came in, the shepherd would dip down into the water with his large cup and bring it up full and overflowing. The tired sheep would drink deeply and be refreshed. That cup overflows for you here at the sheepfold. Are you weary and tired? Has your journey since last Sunday morning left you feeling dry and thirsting? Then drink deeply, for your cup overfloweth.

Jesus does not withhold any gift of His grace from any of you. He is the water of life. He is here for you in full measure. Even though you and I have failed Him with our sinful living, He does not stand here at His sheepfold to turn you away. He forgives you. His cup is for you. He is the Shepherd and Savior of each of you. And so, with Jesus as our Good Shepherd, with David we can say rejoicing: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever." Amen.