

## NO FEAR

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 30, 2018  
Based on Isaiah 41:10; I John 4:16–18a; Psalm 27:1–6; Psalm 23:4**

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a fall sermon series on the twenty-third Psalm entitled, “Beside Still Waters.” We have noted previously in this series that Psalm 23 was written by King David, who was drawing upon his childhood experience as a shepherd, but who was actually writing the Psalm much later in his life during one of his darkest hours—when one of his sons, Absalom, had mounted a rebellion against David, and David had been forced to flee from Jerusalem to take refuge in the remote village of Mahanaim. David’s life experiences are reflected in many ways through the Psalm. So far we have considered the first three verses: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Today we continue with the first part of verse four: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.” {prayer}

The image of walking through the valley of the shadow of death is perhaps the most gripping image in Psalm 23. Walking through a valley could be a pleasant experience, if it is a nice scenic valley. But this is a different sort of valley—the valley of the shadow of death. The Hebrew term that is translated here as “shadow of death” is a single Hebrew word: צַלְמָוֶת—*tsalmavet*. The word appears eighteen times in the Old Testament, where it always indicates a place of darkness and gloom, a place of great trouble and threat. At times it is used to denote the place of the dead. The valley of *tsalmavet*, the valley of the shadow of death, is a place you do not want to enter, but you might find yourself there anyways.

The image finds an immediate point of reference in David’s experience with shepherding. In the rugged hill country of Israel there are numerous steep ravines. A sheep that ends up in one of those chasms can find itself hemmed in, often in the shadows, with no food or water, and perhaps no apparent way out; and who knows what predator might be around the next turn? The “valley of the shadow of death” could be a very literal place for a sheep.

But the valley of the shadow of death is also an image that connects very much with human life; and it certainly connected with several difficult experiences in David’s life. There was the time when he stood in front of Goliath, or the time when he was fleeing from the murderous designs of King Saul; but David was in the deepest valley of this sort at the moment when he wrote Psalm 23, because his own treacherous son, Absalom, was coming after him with an army. He was squarely in the valley of *tsalmavet*, the shadow of death.

The natural feeling in such a circumstance is fear. We may find ourselves today in circumstances that would very much cause us to fear. There may be a threat to our health, or a financial loss, or some personal trial, or a problem in our family that causes us great anxiety;

or it may be circumstances in the larger society around us—the division, the wrong, the hatred, the violence, the uncertainty of our age—that cause us to fear for the future. In various ways, we may be journeying through the valley of the shadow of death, and may experience a sense of dread.

Yet in the Psalm David says, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” (Psalm 23:4) He is in the dark valley, but proclaims that he does not fear. This is not bravado. It is not a case of David imagining that he is just so tough, mustering up the spunk to proclaim, “I refuse to be afraid.” Such bravado can look bold on the outside; but often when people loudly proclaim that they are not afraid, it is just a mask for the terror that they actually feel deep inside. David, however, had a solid reason to not fear. We can gain insight into that by looking back into David’s past to the story of Goliath.

When Goliath strode onto the battlefield, he was a champion warrior, of the most outsized proportions, who had brutally slain many an opponent. He mockingly shouted to the young David, “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field.” (I Samuel 17:44) No one else in Israel had been willing to go up against Goliath because they had all been absolutely terrified; and David appeared to have no chance. David responded to Goliath not with bravado but with faith. He replied, “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord . . . The battle is God’s.” (I Samuel 17:45,47) David did not fear because he trusted that God was with him.

Years later, facing an even larger giant in the rebel army of Absalom, David wrote, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”

Right here there is a very interesting turn in the Psalm. Up to this point in Psalm 23, David speaks of God in the third person. “The Lord is my shepherd,” he says, “I shall not want. *He* maketh me to lie down in green pastures, *He* leadeth me beside the still waters, *He* restoreth my soul. *He* leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for *His* name’s sake.” (Psalm 23:1–3) But now in this verse, he suddenly switches to addressing God directly: “I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.” (Psalm 23:4) Clearly David at this point is doing much more than talking *about* God; he is affirming and taking hold of a direct personal connection with God. He is experiencing the real presence of God, to lead him through the valley.

In the 2011 documentary film, “Nefarious—Merchant of Souls,” which was about sex trafficking, there is a point where a woman who was a former prostitute tells about her experience in the valley, in this scene: *[a video clip was shown, in which a woman talked about overdosing, having a heart attack, experiencing darkness, calling upon Jesus in the midst of it all, and finally realizing, after an amazing recovery, that God was with her]*

When we are in the valley, we are not alone. God is near, with amazing grace, with healing mercy, with the power to lead us through. And God is with us, not just to get us out of one particular jam. In that documentary, that woman goes on later to describe how, by the working of God’s Spirit, she grew in Christian life and became a changed person. When God

leads us through the valley, it is not simply to an escape from trouble but to bring us on a journey toward a positive destiny.

This connects with another aspect of shepherding in the Middle East. It is common practice for shepherds to move their flocks during the hot dry summer season to higher elevations, where it is cooler and wetter and the forage is more plentiful. Often the way to get through the hills to higher ground is by traveling up the ravines that cut through the hills. The ravines may appear dangerous and frightening; sheep may be nervous in traversing the difficult ground, but in the process of traveling through these valleys the flock is moving toward better pastures. Sometimes people find that a time of being in a dark valley is a time when they become more closely connected with God and ultimately are able to move spiritually into higher ground.

In Psalm 23, David is quite clear that the life of faith does not mean that we are spared the dark valleys. Difficult times come—sometimes because of our own mistakes and failings, sometimes because of the actions of others, or sometimes simply because of the vicissitudes of life. Faith does not mean that we are released from difficulty; it means that we can be released from *fear*—as we know and trust in the presence of God. David says it well: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou are with me.” (Psalm 23:4)

This connects directly with what God ultimately does for the salvation of all humanity in Jesus Christ. When Jesus is born, the angels proclaim, “Fear not,” [*The angel said to them, “Fear not” Luke 2:10*] and his name is called, Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us.” [*His name shall be called Emmanuel (God with us) Matthew 1:23*] In Christ we can experience in full measure that God is truly with us, and when we know the powerful love of Christ, then we no longer need be afraid. As the first letter of John puts it, “Perfect love [the love of Christ] casts out fear.” [1 John 4:18]

None of this is to minimize how difficult it may be if you find yourself in the dark valley. Sometimes the valleys in life are very dark and very long and very hard. But a key word in Psalm 23, verse 4, is the word “through”—“Yea, though I walk through the valley.” The clear message is that we are not stuck in the valley, but the Shepherd will lead us through; the Lord our Shepherd will lead us finally through death itself! When we trust in God, we can have confidence that we are moving toward a bright future.

In the story of David, God did lead him through the rebellion of Absalom. Although circumstances early on looked quite grim for David, he was able to regroup; and he finally defeated the rebel forces, and was able to return to Jerusalem as king. A key factor in the story was that God was not only at work strengthening and guiding David, but God was also at work through several companions who stood by David. There was his faithful general Joab, who would provide decisive leadership for David’s forces, and there was his good friend and advisor, Hushai. After David had fled from Jerusalem, Hushai planted himself in the capital city and pretended to proclaim allegiance to Absalom. He then gave Absalom bad

advice, causing Absalom to delay in his pursuit of David. This was decisive for David, because it gave David time to recover and finally mount an effective resistance to the rebellion. When you are in the dark valley, it helps to have friends.

Right here we see something of the power of the church. God does not leave us alone in the valley, but God connects us in the church with one another, so that we can support and help each other as we journey through the valley. As Paul said to the church at Thessalonika, “Encourage one another and build each other up.” (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

The twenty-third Psalm deals squarely with the trials of life. It does not gloss over the challenges we face, but points us to the answer—to look to the Lord our Shepherd, to trust in God, and let the Lord lead us toward a future that finally is glorious and everlasting.