

How Low Can You Go?

[Texts - Psalm 23, John 10:11-19]

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The 23rd Psalm is one of the most beloved and recognized passages of scripture. It's given comfort, guidance and hope to countless people for literally thousands of years. It is included in the sacred texts of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faith traditions. And of all the Psalms attributed to David, this one seems particularly fitting - having both a majestic tone and a rustic feel. As both a king and a shepherd, David knew first-hand about the protective care that good shepherds provide for their sheep, and good leaders provide for their citizens.

While there are many different themes and images that we could explore from this Psalm, this morning I want to focus on just one of them: the "walk through the valley of the shadow of death". [Talk about an up-beat sermon!] And if "the *valley of the shadow of death*" sounds dark and foreboding, then hold on to your holy water, because we're going even darker and deeper!

In this morning's Continuing Testament, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes, "God is good. Nature is not good. Nature is blind. Nature is amoral. Fire burns, falling rocks injure, and disease germs infect everybody, whether they deserve it or not." Bad things happen to good people - as the Kushner family so painfully discover with the premature aging and death of their young son, Aaron. The truth is, that simply being *alive* gives us about a 90% chance that something bad will happen to us. And there's a 100% *guarantee* that each of us is going to die. There's just no getting around it: someday we will all "walk through the valley of the shadow of death." That's obviously a given; but *how* we walk through that valley, remains to be seen.

For the Psalmist, the strong and loving presence of the Holy One makes it possible to walk through that valley “fearing no evil.” The Psalmist believes, and trusts, that the Source of all Life is consistently good; therefore he realizes that no matter what he faces - in life, or death - he need not be afraid. Suffering and loss are a part of Life; but the guiding and sustaining love of the Holy One can help us move through Life’s deepest, darkest valley with faith, rather than fear; with courage and confidence that - in the end - all will be well.

For the Psalmist, and for you and me, trusting in the love and goodness of our Divine Source means so much more than just anticipating a Divine grace or comfort in our final days. *Every* day, there are things that can stir-up our fears - from terrorist attacks to gun violence; climate change to potential pandemics; natural disasters to unnaturally disastrous political leaders - all kinds of things that can heighten our sense of dread. We can even experience certain kinds of “death” while we’re still alive - like the death of a relationship or a marriage, the death of a dream or a career, the death of our physical or mental capabilities, or the devastating death of a loved one. No matter what we do, no matter how hard we try, you and I cannot avoid walking “through the valley of the shadow.” However, the way in which we walk through it, and Who walks *with* us, can make all the difference in the world. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me!”

When you and I recognize that the Holy Source of our lives, and of all Life, is with us in any situation we encounter, we can find the courage to face even our deepest fears. And when we truly trust that God is good, caring, and compassionate, we realize that ultimately no evil can overcome us. Now obviously there’s a difference between believing this in our heads, and trusting it in our hearts. Hopefully, this is where the person and example of Jesus Christ can help us.

Jesus *is* the Good Shepherd who “lays down his life for the sheep.” He is willing to take-on the forces of fear and evil in order to bring freedom to the oppressed, strength to the weary, and good news to the afflicted. And even when the powers of darkness and hatred have done their worst, the power of Christ’s Light and Love rises anew. It rose on that first Easter morning, and it continues to rise-up within the hearts and lives of Christ’s followers every day.

Each time you and I find the courage to stand-up for what is fair and just, kind and compassionate, we enhance our ability to “walk through the valley of the shadow.” And every time we trust that Divine goodness is stronger than the power of evil, we learn to overcome our fears. This is what it means to “practice” our faith. It’s not simply talking about our beliefs or values - it’s actually living-out those beliefs and values day-after-day. It’s not about debating the Nature of God, but rather embracing that Divine Nature within ourselves. It isn’t merely partaking of the Body of Christ in Holy Communion, it’s about our *being* the living, loving Body of Christ in a challenging and sometimes dangerous world.

In Life, bad things are going to happen - there’s just no getting around it. However, by the grace of the Holy One and with the support and encouragement of one another, you and I can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil. For the Holy One is with us, every step of the way. And in Divine Wisdom, that Holy Presence is made known to us through the loving hands and hearts of one another. As members of the mortal human family - and as members of the immortal Body of Christ - you and I never walk alone! Let’s remember that! Let’s trust that! And let’s allow that knowledge to help us continue our Life’s journey with compassion and confidence, courage and hope.