

“VALLEYS AND MOUNTAINTOPS”

PSALM 23 GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY MAY 7, 2017

THE FIRST TIME I REMEMBER MEMORIZING THE 23RD PSALM, I WAS ATTENDING THE THIRD GRADE IN A PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. EVERY MORNING WHEN THE SCHOOL BELL RANG, my teacher Mrs. Carter required all of us, who were her students, to stand up alongside of our desks. Then we would place our right hands over our hearts. Looking in the direction of the American flag, proudly displayed above the chalk board, we would all then say the **PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**. After this, we would then **RECITE THE 23RD PSALM** together; after which we would also then pray the **LORD’S PRAYER** together.

NO ONE EVER OBJECTED TO OUR DOING ANYTHING LIKE THAT IN 1963 because there was **FAR LESS RELIGIOUS PLURALISM** present in the United States back then than there is today and there was also far less **ABJECT ATHEISM** in the world at that time too!

TODAY IS GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY—and the appointed Psalm for this Fourth Sunday of Easter, every year, is **PSALM 23**, without a doubt this is one of the most memorized passages of Scripture among God’s people everywhere, throughout time.

Many Bible scholars believe that King David was inspired to write this 23rd Psalm when his personal life was in a great state of turmoil and he was experiencing some sort of major upheaval at that time! Such Bible scholars point our attention to **2 SAMUEL 15**. There we read of that horrendous time in David’s life when his own son **ABSALOM** had rebelled against him; who even plotted against his father to have David thrown off Israel’s throne—that he might reign there instead!

ABSALOM’S PLAN was so well **devised and executed that he almost succeeded**, except that Absalom ends up being killed on the battlefield instead. Throughout this tumultuous time in David’s life he is moved by the **HOLY SPIRIT TO THINK BACK TO THE DAYS OF HIS YOUTH** when he was serving as a shepherd boy attending to his father Jesse’s sheep. It suddenly dawned on him that **just as he had lovingly cared for those sheep**, so the **LORD God Almighty** was now loving him and attending to his every need as well—but in an **EXPONENTIALLY GREATER WAY!**

So, David writes: *“The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He makes me to walk in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. My cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”* (Psalm 23)!

There are three great things David reminds us here that “good” shepherds do for their sheep, if they are good and faithful shepherds, that the LORD God Almighty had done for him all throughout his life.

Firstly, the good shepherd PROVIDES for his sheep. Secondly, the good shepherd GUIDES HIS SHEEP. And thirdly, the good shepherd PROTECTS his sheep.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD PROVIDES FOR HIS SHEEP: Sheep are not known to be the smartest animals that the good Lord ever placed upon this earth; far from it! Sheep would never be able find the green pastures or the still waters required for their daily sustenance, in terms of food and water, if they had to find those great resources themselves!

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want! He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters!” Here we are given the beautiful picture of some very contented sheep who have just **FEASTED ON SOME SUMPTUOUS GREEN GRASS TO THEIR HEARTS’ CONTENT AND DRUNK FROM SOME STILL POOLS OF FRESH WATER TO THOROUGHLY SATISFY THEIR THIRST**—all satisfied and satiated—laying down in the green grass for a snoozer.

Because the Lord is my shepherd—he is going to provide me with everything I will need!

This doesn’t mean that he will necessarily **GIVE ME MY EVERY HEART’S DESIRE—BECAUSE WE LIVE IN A DAY WHEN WE CAN OFTEN CONFUSE NEEDS AND NECESSITIES WITH LUXURIES AND EXTRAS.**

The good shepherd provides for his sheep in that **HE ALONE KNOWS WHERE THOSE GRASSY MEADOWS ARE TO BE FOUND AND WHERE THOSE POOLS OF FRESH WATER COULD BE FOUND**—for sheep are such skittish animals that they are far too fearful to drink of a babbling brook or a fast-moving stream!

THE GOOD SHEPHERDS ALSO GUIDES HIS SHEEP:

I know that when it comes to having a sense of direction, some of us as human beings are much more skilled in that regard than are others of us. Hopefully, when it comes to being a married couple, either the husband or the wife; at least one of those two people, will hopefully have a good sense of direction; because that little **GPS SYSTEM** is not always helpful to you that is built into your Smart Phone when you come out of a crowded shopping mall and can’t remember exactly where it is that you parked your car!

I have never been known for having a good sense of the direction. And I will never forget that time when I parked my car in the **PARKING GARAGE OF THE OHARE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT IN CHICAGO** years ago, when I was attending Concordia University in Chicago; back in the day when I accompanied my roommate to the gate of his departure—because you could do that back in those days—only to come out of the airport without the foggiest idea whatsoever where I had parked my car. I finally found it—but it wasn’t easy!

People, like sheep, become lost easily too—not so much in terms of simply discerning their own geographical directions, **BUT IN THEIR WANDERING OFF INTO PATH OF LIVING THAT GOD HAS CLEARLY**

TOLD US WOULD BE DANGEROUS FOR US TO WANDER OFF ON, when we stray outside the **BOUNDARIES OF HIS TEN COMMANDMENTS**, for example!

THE GOOD SHEPHERDS ALSO PROTECTS HIS SHEEP.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me!”

There are times of course when the good shepherd is guiding his sheep through valleys; valleys that were scary in large part because the height of the mountains' walls blocked the sun from casting its darkness-bursting beams into that sort of fearful, rugged terrain.

Yes, there were times when wolves could veer around the corner to spot the sheep and—other predatory members of the animal kingdom could pose some big threats to these defenseless sheep too—but this is **PRECISELY WHY THE SHEPHERD CARRIED WITH HIM THAT BIG ROD! THE GOOD SHEPHERD WOULD NEVER USE HIS ROD TO BEAT THE SHEEP, BUT ONLY USE THE ROD TO PROTECT THEM.**

The staff was that long, skinny pole that the shepherd would carry with him with its **U-SHAPED CROOK AT THE TOP** that the shepherd could use to gently nudge the sheep with from time to time! Sometimes, when that wandering, foolish sheep would be standing on the edge of a high precipice from which it could easily have lost its footing, the shepherd could skillfully take that shepherd's staff and place it around the sheep's neck, not to harm it, but to lovingly pull it back to safety without spooking it—to its sure demise below!

Brothers and sisters, have you ever stopped to think that life, our human lives, are sometimes like 2 sides of a coin? When you are looking at the one side of a coin, you can't see the other side. In a similar way, the Bible presents to us different sides or pictures of life!

Our lives as they are lived out in this world – certainly do, by the grace of God, have their share of joys and celebrations – joys and celebrations that are marked by marriages and birth, graduations and promotions, barbecues and banquets! **YET THE WHOLE TIME WE ARE LIVING OUT OUR LIVES HERE ON EARTH, WE ARE ALSO LIVING UNDER A GREAT SHADOW, SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING, UNDER AN OVERCAST SKY—A SHADOW AND THE OVERCAST SKY OF DEATH—THAT ST PAUL ONCE IDENTIFIED AS “THE LAST ENEMY TO BE FACED BY US ALL” (I CORINTHIANS 15:26)!**

Even with the hope of eternal life, Christians also experience, at times throughout their earthly pilgrimage—great pain and disappointments, a sense of loss and grief that death brings to us. When that great shadow of an overcast sky called death creeps over a loved one of ours and that last enemy called “DEATH,” is allowed to swing its sickle, we who are left feel torn apart as one life is cut off from the rest of us who yet live. The hope of enjoying another day together and of doing things tomorrow with that other person ever again is taken away from us, we feel a void, and at times, we may even experience a great sense of emptiness within us!

BUT LET'S FLIP TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT COIN CALLED “LIFE” NOW, REMEMBERING THAT OUR GOD HAS MUCH MORE IN STORE FOR US – THAN FOR US TO SIMPLY LIVE OUT OUR LIVES IN THIS WORLD—THAT MARTIN LUTHER SOMETIMES REFERRED TO IN HIS DAY AS “A VALE OF TEARS!”

Jesus, in our Gospel lesson this morning, who is our Good Shepherd reminds us that he has come into our world to offer us – LIFE AND TO OFFER IT TO US MORE ABUNDANTLY!

THAT MORE ABUNDANT LIFE IS THE SAME THING THAT JESUS WAS SPEAKING TO NICODEMUS ABOUT ONE NIGHT WHEN HE SAID, “UNLESS SOMEONE IS BORN AGAIN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT, HE CAN IN NO WAY ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD; FOR THAT, WHICH IS BORN OF THE FLESH IS FLESH AND THAT WHICH IS BORN OF THE SPIRIT, IS SPIRIT!”

To have the more abundant life is to enjoy the forgiveness of sins and to know that we have been reconciled to our Heavenly Father—through the perfect life, death and resurrection of God’s only begotten Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

To enjoy the more abundant life is to know that this Good Shepherd whom David confessed as his LORD deliberately rode into that shadowy valley of death that first Palm Sunday. Our Lord Jesus left the brilliance of heaven and descended to earth, when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, so that he thereby might take upon himself our human form—and become one of us—true Man—but also the true SON OF GOD, JESUS THE ONE WITHOUT SIN.

And aren’t we glad that in our first lesson today—our God gives us a glimpse into heaven already now—into that place of victory and all that it might mean for us! John the Apostle was exiled on Patmos one Sunday morning, when the Spirit of God came upon him up and opened-up a window into heaven for him!

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands and crying with a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” (Revelation 7:7-12)!

And who are these people? This great multitude? These are those people who have come out of the great tribulation—that is, out of the sufferings we all experience at times here on earth in this present life—through the valley of the shadow of death. They are those who have passed through and are now on the other side of the valley. We cannot now presently see them—EXCEPT IN OUR MEMORIES—but through the Apostle John, God has given us a vision of their joyful experience with Christ our Savior and all his people in glory!

For at the time of their death, our loved ones lay aside the burdens and battles, the stresses and strains of valley walking. Our loved ones then have joined the great multitude in the throne room of heaven—and our God wants us to know that this is our future too!

Who are these? These are those who have taken their robes and washed them white in the blood of the Lamb; those who have confessed their sins and received the more abundant life that our God gives us already again today!

I wanted to close my sermon with a little story – that though it is a made-up story – still impresses upon us – the fact that eternal life and our future place in heaven, is a free gift of God’s grace to us!

One day there was a man who died and St. Peter met him at the Pearly Gates and says, "Here's how it works! You need 100 points to enter heaven! You tell me all the good things you've done, and I will give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was! When you reach 100 points you get in!"

"Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her and I loved her deeply with all my heart!"

"That's wonderful!" says St Peter. "That's worth two points!"

"Only two points?" the man says. "Well, I also attended church services all my life and praised God with all of my faithful tithes and offerings, also fill positions on the Church Council and on many boards and committees in the church!"

"Terrific!" says St. Peter, "That's certainly worth a point!"

"One point!?!?" exclaimed that man, who then went on to say: "But in addition to all of those things I also started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans!"

"Fantastic! That's worth two points," says St. Peter.

"Two points!?!?" Exasperated the man cries, "At this rate the only way that I am going to get into heaven is by the grace of God!"

"Bingo! You can come in!" says St Peter as he lets the man into heaven!

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of yourselves! It is the gift of God, not because of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9)! Amen