

Psalm 23:4 - Lent Mid-week V - 2023

גַּם כִּי-אֶלֶף בְּגִיַּא צִלְמוֹת “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*
לֹא-אֶירָא רָע כִּי אַתָּה עִמָּדִי *I will fear no evil, for You are with me,*
שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתְּךָ הִמָּה יְנַחֲמֵנִי *Your rod and Your staff they comfort me.*”

Earlier in this series on Psalm 23, we heard how the LORD, who gave us sinners eternal life through the green pastures of His Word and the still waters of Holy Baptism, enables us to be at peace and rest in Him. We also heard that the LORD continues to “lead” us “*in the path of righteousness.*” These words remind me of Jesus’ words, “*follow me*” (John 21:19), which emphasizes His position in front, blazing the trail/the path of righteousness, which He reveals and fulfills through His Word and Sacraments. O come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, and follow Him, “*the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*” (Hebrews 12:2). This is our vocation as God’s people, to follow Him. What it means to “follow” Jesus is another sermon. For now let’s focus on “vocation.”

‘Vocation’ is something which originates from Scripture. First and foremost, it refers to God’s vocation of calling all people through the Gospel (more specifically through the Good News of Jesus’ death and resurrection) for our salvation. Once we have heard and received that salvation from God who works through the vocations of others (usually through our parents and the pastor in Holy Baptism), then God continues to call others to salvation through us and the various vocations He gives us. For example, our vocation as a Christian neighbor, student, banker, spouse, parent, grand-parent, etc. While prayer is an important part of the way we all carry-out our vocations as Christians, Luther was quick to point out that if God has given us other gifts and abilities, besides our faith and prayer, He also seeks to work through us and the gifts and abilities He gives us to answer those prayers whenever possible, while we walk through this “*valley of the shadow of death,*” fearing no evil for the LORD יְהוָה is with us, His “rod” and His “*staff they comfort*” us (from Psalm 23:4, our focus for this evening).

To help us to be good messengers of God’s love in this “*valley of the shadow of death*” without fear, let me first highlight the word “**shadow of death.**” People die everyday and are eternally delivered from the “**shadow of death**” in this life and are now in either in the total light and life of heaven, or in the total darkness and death of hell (according to their faith). I don’t imagine there being any shadow’s in heaven (certainly not any shadow’s of death), nor in the total darkness of hell.

However, since we are still alive in this world, we are not in heaven or hell yet. Instead we are in the “**shadow of death.**” But if there is a shadow, there must also be some light around, since a shadow (according to the dictionary) is “a dark area made by an object blocking rays of light.” So, in this life we live in both the “**shadow of death,**” and in the dawn of life.

How is it possible to not be afraid of the evil all around us in this “*valley of the shadow of death*”? Because “*You (יהוה) /Yahweh, Almighty God, our Good Shepherd, the Light of the world) are with me!*” We, in a sense, are the object that is casting the shadow, as Jesus shines His light on us. So, instead of focusing on the shadow of death, let’s turn to Jesus and the light of His Word.

Before Jesus ascended visibly into heaven, He said, “*And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20)—the end of this world or our life in this world. Our Lord never leaves us alone in this world. He is always with us, and He is always in, with, and under His Word and Sacraments to feed, strengthen and protect us in this “*valley of the shadow of death*,” assuring us of our eternal life with Him. Fear keeps us in it’s grip only when we either don’t know, forget, or reject our Lord’s promise to be with us and bless us. For God’s perfect love in Jesus Christ casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

Where is יהוה present to comfort and bless us? Certainly He is with us in this physical world, working through all things to bless us with our physical necessities (as He promised in our Gospel reading), even though it doesn’t always look that way. But David also said in Psalm 23, that Yahweh’s “*rod...and staff they comfort me.*”

What are a shepherd’s rod and staff meant to remind us of? One of the purposes of a shepherd’s rod is to tap the sheep when it starts veering off the path. “*Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him*” (Proverbs 13:24). Sometimes the shepherd also has to use his rod to fight off or kill a wolf which is attacking his sheep. And one of the primary things the shepherd uses his staff for is to rescue his sheep when they are in trouble—to (for example) pull his sheep out of a ravine.

The shepherd’s rod and staff can be compared to the Law and Gospel of God’s Word. This is where God promises to be to comfort us—the Law and Gospel of His Word. Through the Law He shows us that we are sinners who are in need of both His discipline and a Savior. And, through the Gospel, He assures us that Jesus is our Savior—that the Son of God became a man in Jesus Christ so that He could fulfill the way of righteousness for us through His perfect life, and then pay for our sins through His damning death, thus setting us free from our sins, death, and the devil. He also rose from the dead to assure us of this Good News.

My final question may seem like a foolish one. Where can we find God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit today? Because we have faith, we know that God is always with us and within us. But, at the same time, God reminds us in the Bible that there is also a sinful nature in us. So if we look inside ourselves for God’s presence, we have our doubts. If we relying on our memory of God’s Word (especially as we get older), or our ability to interpret what we do remember from God’s Word, we will run into the same problem that Eve did when she was tempted by the devil.

I’m referring to our OT reading for this evening (Genesis 3:1-8) where Eve, instead of responding to Satan’s initial question with the Word of God, she repeated the words of God and some words from Eve (“*neither shall you touch it*,” referring to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). How often do we do the same thing whenever we either forget, misinterpret, add to, or doubt in God’s Word? That’s one of the reasons God wants us, like the Bereans in Acts 17, to “*examine the Scriptures daily*,” for it’s there that God promises to not only expose our sinful ways, but to also forgive us so that we will “*fear no evil*” from our sins, death, or the devil in this “*valley of the shadow of death*” on our way to the glorious light of heaven, sharing God’s rays of love and light in Jesus Christ along the way.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.