



Pentecost 9 – Proper 11 (B)

You Are With Me

[RCL] Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.”

In the 23rd Psalm, Israel’s great king, David, who was once a shepherd boy, names that the true shepherd is the Lord God. The psalm goes on to show how food, water, and shelter are provided. David knows that it is only because of God’s providence that we shall not be in want. This is a monarch acknowledging that we should not place our essential trust in any ruler. We are to trust the creator of the cosmos, the Holy Trinity who is with us always.

As the psalmist continues, the sheep are guided along right pathways. Then we come to the midpoint of the psalm, the valley of the shadow of death. The very structure of the psalm places the emphasis here, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me.”

Trust in God is central to the 23rd Psalm as the sheep trust the shepherd to guide them through the valley of the shadow of death. For the sheep, it is the dark valley. For any of us, it may have been the loss of a job; the breakup of a marriage; a diagnosis of cancer; the death of a parent or even the death of a child. The valley of the shadow of death takes different forms, but a time in your life when the shadows seem to lengthen and the path before you is uncertain is something we all face and a place which our friends and family will also need to navigate. Before you go through the valley, it is best to have placed your trust in God.

Every day, we find ourselves with people who know well the valley the psalmist describes. Each one of us encounters people who don’t know how they are going to make it through the next 24 hours, much less the week ahead. We are surrounded by people are masking deep pain with prescription drugs, alcohol, workaholism, people pleasing to the point of destroying their lives, and a host of other self-defeating

behaviors. Many people sometime between the age of 10 and 25 pick up emotional wounds that will remain festering and seeping poison into their psyches unless they can find healing.

At 40, someone will remember the name of the bully in sixth grade and at 50, can recall the friend who gossiped and betrayed them in high school. Any of us can fall into replaying old messages in our heads of the harsh and cruel things others have said and see ourselves through their eyes. If you take those messages to heart, you are not seeing yourself as God sees you. God sees you as beloved and holds out forgiveness and healing in Jesus.

Scripture makes this love of God clear, even as it notes that life will not always be without difficulty. Christians, even Episcopalians, don't have inherently easier lives without rough spots. Far from promising that with God in our lives, everything is going to be perfect, the Bible promises that we will face tough times, hard decisions, and painful losses. Following Jesus won't keep us out of a car wreck or health crisis. We end up in the emergency room or ICU like anyone else. And we, too, can put our hope in good grades, the perfect school, the right spouse or house or car or career, none of which is bad in itself, actually quite good, yet all these are still no safety net.

What we do have as followers of Jesus is a relationship with the God who is working to redeem our world one precious life at a time. We have the knowledge that everything we now see and experience is not all there is. God is with us in every valley we traverse. The language of a shepherd and a sheep is significant. The maker of heaven and earth knows you by name, has always loved you, will never give up on you, and will be with you, whatever you face.

The turn of the 15th-century Christian mystic Julian of Norwich learned of God's abiding care in the midst of hardship through a series of visions. At the time she had her mystical experience, the 30-year old Julian was on what she and those around her thought was her deathbed. It was May of 1373. As she lay in great weakness, she saw some intense images of Jesus. Lady Julian would recover and then spend many years reflecting on the visions. Twenty years after rising from that deathbed experience, she set ink to paper to create the first book in the English language known to be written by a woman. In reflecting on her own near-death and Jesus' presence with her in the shadow of death she wrote,

“If there be anywhere on earth [where] a lover of God is always kept safe from falling, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again, we are always kept in the same precious love. Between God and the soul there is no between. He did not say, You will never have a rough passage, you will never be over-strained, you will never feel uncomfortable, but he did say You will never be overcome.”

The reason we are not overcome, the way we can make it through the valley, is that we are never alone. “Between God and the soul there is no between.” This is the same reason the sheep need not fear with the shepherd alongside them.

For hurting people, the good news of Jesus is not only about getting into heaven, though it is about that. We know that God knows us fully, loves each of us unreservedly, and wants better for us. God wants the same for others in your life. The Gospel is as much about getting people out of the hell they are in now as they feel they are not known and loved or that they are alone in the valley.

We can be a part of how God shares compassion with those who are traversing their own valley of the shadow of death. We get to be a part of stopping the cycle of pain and abuse as we share love and compassion with our friends, co-workers, and family, who find themselves lost or feeling alone. We can offer our presence. This may be a listening ear, a kind word, or a hug, but it is mostly being with some when they face an uncertain path.

Beyond this, you can invite those you know who need this compassion to join you for worship. When you invite them to join you in worship, you are offering a lifeline to someone who needs to know and experience the presence and power of the Holy Spirit that we find in this place. And you can be sure that this community is one where they will be welcomed and loved by the congregation and by the host of our feast, who is Jesus. You can also welcome those who show up here on their own as if welcoming Jesus. Far from being a chore, showing love and compassion to someone who is hurting by inviting or welcoming them to church is how God blesses us with that same love. When we see others supported as the shadows lengthen across their way, we build up trust for the times when we are the one longing for that assurance of God's presence.

There is no doubt that we and those we love will face uncertainty. Placing our essential trust in the Good Shepherd is how we prepare for the unpredictable turns life can take. This is where Lady Julian's words assist us no matter what we face in the valley of the shadow of death as she teaches what the shepherd's care revealed to her in an hour of need, "In falling and rising again we are always kept in the same precious love. Between God and the soul there is no between."

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