

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Shepherd Encourages Us

Sunday, March 31, 2019

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Psalm 23

In one of my favorite “Peanuts” cartoons, Lucy is in her psychiatrist booth counseling Charlie Brown. He has just lost another baseball game and feels depressed and defeated. Lucy looks at Charlie and says, “Look, Chuck, you are going to have face facts—life is a series of ups and downs.” Charlie gets up and screams, “I hate downs, all I want is ups!”

I think we can all relate to Charlie Brown. All of us would prefer life to be all ups and no downs, all peaks and no valleys. But we know better. All of us will face valleys in life. The key is our attitude when we are in the valley, or to put it another way, how we see the valley. The key is how we respond to the valley.

Verse four of the 23rd Psalm helps us develop the right attitude in the valley. It is the one verse most people have memorized, “Even though I walk through the valley, I will fear no evil.” In this verse David is sharing with us why he does not fear the valley. He is also encouraging us to not fear the valley!

I don’t know what the valley is in your life today. Perhaps it is a troubled relationship, a bad report from a doctor, an obstacle at home or work, or family problems. I don’t know what challenge you may be facing today, but I do know this: You don’t have to fear the valley, you don’t have to be a victim in the valley, you don’t have to stay in the valley. All you have to do is learn what David learned about the valley.

The most important word in this verse is “through.” “I walk through the valley.” David knew he wouldn’t die in the valley, stop in the valley, or stay in the valley. David knew he would walk THROUGH the valley; he would come out of it. Why? The shepherd was with him, helping him. He says, “For you are with me.”

So often we get stuck in valleys because we get stuck in bad thinking. We come to a valley and

the challenge or difficulty is so great that we think that we will never get out of it. We believe it will be our lot in life forever.

What we tend to forget is we are not alone. We have help. We have the shepherd, and because we have the shepherd we won’t stay in the valley forever. So, it does not matter what valley you are in today. With the help of the shepherd you will walk through the valley. Count on it.

A wise man was once asked how he overcame difficulties. He replied, “First, I try to go around it. If I can’t go around it, then I try to get under it. If I can’t get under it, I try to go over it. And if I can’t get over it, I just plow right through it... God and I plow right through it” (*The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale, condensed edition, p. 28).

I like that! You and God are a majority. Together you can conquer anything. Use the great shepherd. Rely on his wisdom and power. There is a great old saying, “If you don’t bother God, everything else will bother you!”

Don’t fear the valley, for the shepherd is with you.

Ephesians 6:10 says it well: “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.”

Perhaps you want the power of the shepherd in your valley, but you don’t know how to get it. Maybe the faith is new to you and you never knew you could receive power for living. Perhaps you have been in church all your life, but you have never lived life with power. Well, this morning, I am going to share with you how you can get fully charged and live life with the power of the shepherd.

The first thing you have to do is expect the power. I love the old story about the crowd that went to the hilltop to pray for rain. Their crops and cattle had died. Their land had dried up and they were desperate and discouraged. On their way up

the mountain, they ran into this lady who had on a rain hat, rain boots, a rain jacket, and she was holding an umbrella. She looked silly and so a man said to her, "What are you wearing that stuff for? Don't you know it hasn't rained in weeks?" She replied, "What are you coming up here for anyway? If I ask God for rain, I expect a downpour!"

The key to manifesting the power of God in your valley is to expect something to happen. Many people feel powerless because they have low expectations. You can see and hear it in their attitudes. You ask them how they are doing and they say, "Well, same old, same old" Then they wonder why they don't experience powerful things in their life. God will not force his power on us anymore than God will force his love or will on us. Therefore, God's power often remains stuck under a dark, thick cloud of low expectations. In order to experience God's power, you must give God permission to work. And the way you give God permission to work is through your expectations.

Try waking up every day and saying to God, "I expect your power in my life today and I know I will receive it." Try coming to worship on Sunday saying to God, "God, I expect you to speak to me today." Try going to work with the attitude, "Lord, I expect you to use me to help somebody today." Expect God's power and receive God's power! You don't have to fear the valley because you have God's presence and power.

There is another reason why we should never fear the valley. Oftentimes the best way to the mountain top is through the valley. All shepherds know this. If they want to lead sheep to the best places on top of a mountain, they will most always go through the valley. And why? The valley has the best terrain to climb on, the best source of water, and the best source of grass and food.

It is the same way in our lives. God often uses the valley for great purposes. God uses the valley to make us stronger and wiser. The valley is often the best way to the promises of God.

Many choose to ignore this truth about the valley and their lives become stuck in the mire of mediocrity. All because they choose to avoid the valley and take the path of least resistance.

If you visit the city of Boston, chances are you will get lost. For you will discover their road systems are a mess. They just wind and turn with no rhyme or reason. The reason for this is simple.

Their roads were constructed along cow paths. And cows, like sheep, always take the path of least resistance. If they come to a hill or obstacle, they will not think about the best way around it. They will just take what they think is the easiest way, up a rock or along a steep grade. When they return to the same area, the grass has been worn down and they take the same path again. The original engineers of Boston decided to build their roads along those same meandering paths ("The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success" by David Cooper, p. 57).

There is a moral to this lesson: Don't always take the paths that others take. For most people's paths have no direction or meaning because they are often the paths of least resistance. But if you want to be the person God wants you to be sometimes you must go through the valley! So, don't cheat yourself, sometimes what you really need and desire is just on other side of the valley.

I'm sure Noah was afraid of facing the valley of the flood and having to build an ark. But Noah obeyed God, saved his family and found a new tomorrow for the world.

I am sure Abraham was afraid of the valley of taking his son to Mount Moriah. But Abraham obeyed God and discovered God would always provide.

I am sure Moses was afraid of the valley of confronting Pharaoh, but Moses obeyed God and led the people of God out of Egypt into promises of God.

I am sure David was afraid of facing the valley that was Goliath. But David took a sling shot and five smooth stones and said, "I come to you in the name of the Lord!"

I'm sure Mary was afraid of the valley that would come to her when being chosen for the virgin birth. Yet, she said, "I am Lord's servant. Let it be as you have said . . ."

And we know Jesus was afraid of facing the valley of the cross. Yet, he endured the cross and redeemed the world!

Don't fear the valley. Don't avoid the valley. Allow God to give you the courage to face it because sometimes our destiny is on the other side of a valley.

Bronnie Ware has worked with the dying for years. She has been at their bedsides and heard many confessions and regrets. She decided to

publish the top five regrets that many dying people have. You want to know the number-one regret she listed? It was “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.”

This regret does not surprise me. It reminds me of a visit I had with a dying man. He poured his heart out to me. One of the last things he said to me was “Pastor Charley, I wish I’d had the courage to be what God wanted me to be. I was just always too afraid of doing what was necessary.”

It is not too late for us. We can live the lives we were destined for. We can gain the courage to do what is necessary and take the trip through the valley.

So, how do we find the courage to face the valleys in our lives without fear? We do it by using what gave David comfort and strength! He would say, “Thy rod and staff, they comfort me.”

Good shepherds are adept at using a rod. If a sheep tries to wander off, a shepherd will throw a rod next to the sheep to startle it and bring it back in line. The rod is also used to protect sheep from predators and to examine their wool for diseases.

It is easy to see that for David the rod is a symbol of God’s guidance through scripture and prayer. When we meditate on God’s Word night and day and immerse ourselves in prayer, we find the faith, strength and courage to face the valleys! So, find your favorite encouraging passage of scripture and repeat it and pray it every day.

Don’t fear the valley! You know what I heard? “Fear once knocked on the door, faith answered, and there was no one there!”

Fear will always ask negative questions like “What if you fail?” And faith answers, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

In the gospel of Mark there is a scene where Jesus and his disciples are on a boat and a storm begins to rage. The disciples are terrified, and they find Jesus asleep. This angers the disciples. They think Jesus is being insensitive to their needs. However, what the disciples did not realize was that Jesus was providing them an example of faith. He was so close to his Heavenly Father that nothing rattled him. But you know what? I really don’t think Jesus was sleeping on that boat that day. I believe he was praying. Prayer is what sustained and

empowered Jesus to face the valleys of life and ministry, most especially the cross.

If we want the courage to face our valleys, we must not only expect God’s power, but we must be plugged into it!

Several years ago, the Tournament of Roses parade was on television on New Year’s Day. I watched as the commentators described all the beautiful floats. Suddenly, in the middle of the parade, a float sputtered and quit. It had run out of gas. The whole parade was held up until someone could get a can of gas and get it started again. The funny thing was the float represented the Standard Oil Company! With all of its oil resources, it had still run out of gas!

We laugh at this incident, but the truth is this is a parable for many in the church today. There are many Christians who love God, come to worship, go to the Bible studies and still feel powerless. They go through life on fumes. They have this deep reservoir of spiritual power at their disposal and they simply will not use it.

Does this describe you today? Do you feel like you are sputtering through life? Do you feel like you are running your life on fumes? Is your only source of energy a cup of coffee in the morning and it wears out by noon? It could be that you are neglecting the power of God that is within you.

Quite often people will come into my office feeling burned out. They drag in and wonder why they feel so exhausted. Typically, I ask them, “When was the last time you spent 10 minutes alone with God?” Most often they reply, “I can’t remember the last time.” Then they wonder why they don’t have any power. In order to receive power, we must be plugged into the power source.

The Celtic Christians used to speak of this time of plugging into the power as the “Thin Place.” In other words, we must find the time and place of prayer where the wall between us and God is so thin that we are able to penetrate it and receive the power we need.

When you are in the valley, give God something to bless and watch him work. Repeat as often as you can, “If God be for me, who can be against me?”

There is a true story told by Tom Butts about a tiger trainer in a big circus troupe whose act was putting tigers through their paces. One night as

he was performing, a car driving a half a mile from the circus hit a power line and all the lights in the circus arena went out. There he was in the dark with a bunch of hungry tigers.

The man panicked for a moment but soon began speaking to the tigers and cracking his whip in his usual manner. The crowd could not see what was happening and everyone was terrified. Before long, the lights came back on, and the act continued normally. Later, a reporter asked the trainer what it was like to be in a cage full of tigers in the dark. He said, "At first, I was really scared. I knew the tigers could see me, for they can see in the dark. Then I

realized that the tigers had no idea I could not see them. That's when I began to speak and crack my whip the way I always do. It worked because they were not aware of any change in the usual performance."

When the lights go out and your fear begins to roar, stand up to your valley and know that God is on your side. Crack the whip of scripture and prayer and keep going. The lights will turn on again and your fear will scurry away. Don't fear the valley! God is with you.



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