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Psalm 23  
**Fearing No Evil**  
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The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is one of the most familiar passages of Scripture. It has led us in the paths of comfort all the days of our lives. But sometimes it is the things that are closest to us that have the hardest time being heard.

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Long before this Psalm was used by Christians, it was a cherished hymn of the Hebrews. While we in the church also read and sing these Psalms, to some degree we are in Jewish territory here. So it is wise to remember the nature of their history with God.

They were a people who were called Israel, which means “those who have struggled with God.” They struggled for a home that they were always trying to get into, hold onto, or get back to. They struggled for peace, for food, and for a future. They struggled most of all for their faith in God.

The Hebrews longed to live with God, like sheep live with a shepherd, but their life was hard. That left them too afraid to keep believing that this Shepherd was leading them to green pastures or that goodness and mercy would surely follow them. So like errant sheep, they frequently rushed down more promising paths toward more manageable gods, and that always led them into unmanageable trouble. When they came back to worship and sang these Psalms, they were telling that story. The Psalms describe the pathos of being a people who get scared and lose their way and the high drama of a God who searches to find his lost sheep.

So the last thing we ought to do is to rush to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm to be reminded that everything is okay. This is the worship literature of those for whom life was anything but okay. And to this day it still expresses the faith affirmations that can be made only by those who have survived the churning, disruptive experiences of lost and frightened sheep. The people who understand this Psalm best are those who have spent the night tossing and turning.

Have you ever been really afraid? Maybe it took a disease to scare you, or a phone call from the police late at night, or a terrible argument with someone you need in your life. When you're really scared, it is hard to think about anything else. You don't know what to do, but you're sure that you have to do something.

We speak sometimes of being scared stiff or paralyzed with fear. But I've got to tell you that is not how I've seen most people react to fear. What I have seen as a pastor is that when people are just terrified with fear, they don't get scared stiff. They run like crazy. I don't know where they are going to run or what they are going to try next. But if they are really afraid, I know they are going to turn up the pace of life to level ten. The late psychologist Rollo May has written, “Humans are the strangest of all of God's creatures, because they run fastest when they have lost their way.” That, of course, is how we get into real trouble—running when we are lost. It is then that we make the worst mistakes with relationships, with family, with work, and certainly with God.

We ran because we allowed some wolf to scare us. We ran because we had more faith in the wolf than we did the Shepherd. But the wolf is not the problem. The fear is our great problem. The problem is that we are not focused on the Shepherd. “Thou art with me,” David says in this Psalm. If you believe that, if you can see it, then you are not going to worry about the wolf.

I have often thought that I don’t so much mind calling the Lord my Shepherd, but I’ve never been too flattered by being called one of his sheep. I had hoped maybe to be the eagle of the Lord, or the strong bear, or the cunning tiger. Sheep are not cunning, strong, or particularly smart. They scare easily and have a knack for getting lost.

Look around you this morning. None of us look lost. We haven’t fallen through society’s cracks into homelessness. We look like we’ve found the green pastures all by ourselves. But David would say, no, it is we who have lost our way. Some are lost in a relationship that’s offered more hurt than love, and others are lost in a job that depletes and slowly sucks away the passion for life. Still others are lost in the guilt of not being good enough, pretty enough, or smart enough for someone whose judgments cut deep. There are people here today who are lost in their battle against a disease and don’t know how to find their way back to the still waters of health. Others are lost in their grief. And how many of us are just simply lost in our shame for things done and left undone. Sins we are too frightened to confess. No wolf can chase you quite like shame.

The reason both the Psalmist and Jesus spend so much time describing us as lost is not to judge us but to save us. And confessing that we are frightened and lost is the means of seeing our salvation. You don’t have to run when you’re afraid. You don’t have to head for the cliff or get tangled in bad decisions (and all decisions made in fear are bad decisions.) You can listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd, who according to John 10, is Jesus Christ. He has come to find the lost sheep of God.

Recently I was driving along a particularly dismal road in an impoverished section of our city. Many of the houses were boarded up, and I could almost feel the despair in the air. I noticed there were many billboards and signs in this depressed neighborhood advertising relief in everything from McDonald’s to bridal shops. Then I saw a sign that was supposed to sell a law firm that would sue someone for you. But across it someone had spray painted “Jesus Saves.” As I drove by, I rolled my eyes with embarrassment and thought, “This won’t help our cause.” The message is so crudely simplistic. How can defacing someone’s property with “Jesus Saves” possibly account for the complexity of the gospel? Besides, what good does it do? I’ve never heard anyone say, “I was going to rob a convenience store, but then I saw this ‘Jesus Saves’ sign and decided to become a foreign missionary.” It’s just embarrassing.

Then I remembered an old essay I had read by Frederick Buechner titled “The Sign by the Highway” which is about these hastily scribbled evangelistic messages that we find on buildings and overpasses. When I got home, I dug it up and re-read it. I had forgotten what Buechner said. Had I remembered, I would probably have avoided it. Buechner claims that the real reason the “Jesus Saves” message embarrassed me is the same reason the gospel has always embarrassed those of us who live in better parts of the city. It dares to tell us that we, too, need to be saved. It conjures up that haunting voice that keeps saying the pasture I’ve found for myself is not green enough, the evil of the city may invade my home any day, and I cannot save myself. That’s embarrassing. But far more importantly, the sign is embarrassing because it simply claims that Jesus saves. It doesn’t say that I deserved to be saved, knew that I needed to be saved, or asked for salvation. Jesus saves because that is what Jesus does. The hope of the sheep is not in their vision of the Shepherd, but it is in the Shepherd’s vision of the sheep. Most of the time we sheep are in big trouble before we even know it.

For what end are we saved? Not to make everything okay for us. Ask David about that—he wrote this Psalm. Ask the Hebrews who sang it as their hymn. Ask anyone who has tried to stay behind Jesus. The

reason we are saved is to follow the Lord “in the paths of righteousness.” Often the right paths are not the easy ones. They lead us away from the places where we are comfortable, maybe even back to frightening neighborhoods. And the paths of righteousness eventually take us all through a few dark valleys. But, David says, don’t be afraid because the Good Shepherd is with us.

Most of the time, that is the only thing about which we are certain. But it is enough. It is enough to make our cup overflow with joy.

Whether or not you can see the Good Shepherd doesn’t matter. Whether you are traveling on the high road or through the dark valley doesn’t matter. Whether or not you deserve to have this Savior couldn’t be more irrelevant. Not after the cross where Jesus put to rest this question of getting what we deserve. He saves because he loves you and is determined to follow you with goodness and mercy all of the days of your life.

So, why do we fear no evil? Not because evil will never visit every one of us—sooner or later it will. And not because we will get to stay in the green pastures—we cannot. The only reason we fear no evil is because, well, because “Jesus Saves.”

Benediction: *“Thou art with me.” That is all you need to believe to be fearless. And only the fearless can enjoy the grace of life. Amen.*