

Even though I walk through
the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff-
they comfort me.
Psalm 23:4

Lesson 1: Dark valleys are an inevitable part of the human experience, especially if you walk the journey the shepherd is going

Even though we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, we do not have to fear because God is with us.

Jesus is the good shepherd who guides us with His rod and staff. If Jesus was walking on earth today, what pastures would He be walking through? Who would He meet along the way? What adversaries would He encounter? Who would He call in, what would He rebuke, and what might be the consequences of that rebuking?

If we are to walk a life like Jesus did, one with integrity, who stands up for what is right, who advocates for the marginalized, and acknowledges the last as first, we will likely go through a unique and threatening dark valley.

God doesn't promise us that following Him will be easy. Rather, the opposite. 2 Timothy 3:12 says "Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Jesus also states in John 15 that "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world- therefore the world hates you."

You're going to be hated for following Jesus. I'm not talking about the natural consequences of using scripture to harm and exclude people and hiding behind pseudo-Jesus as an excuse. I'm talking about Jesus who turns the culture upside down, stands up against those in power and says that the last are first and the first are last.

Following the good shepherd means you might flip over tables, challenge those in authority, speak up against actions and beliefs in your own faith community, and refuse to do what the majority are doing. As a sheep on this path, you will be a part of a flock that accepts all sheep that want to join; God's pasture is inclusive, not exclusive. Anyone who wants to walk in green pastures and lay beside still waters gets to, whether that is a white sheep, brown sheep, black sheep, rainbow sheep, ram or ewe, elderly sheep or a lamb. It also includes the sheep that used to harm other sheep, and repents and wants to be a part of the flock. To follow Jesus is to rejoice with Him when He leaves the ninety-nine of us behind to find the one lost sheep (Matthew 18:12-14).

As a result of advocating for the least of these and going against what the world tells you of hating, competing, ostracizing, exploiting, shouting, shooting and bombing each other, you will likely face consequences.

You might lose friends. You might be disconnected from family. You might be called all kinds of names. You might be ostracized from society, social groups, your job. You might receive a smear campaign and get voted out of office for doing what is right over doing what protects the most powerful. You might be incarcerated and depending on your influence, you might even face a literal shadow of death.

The Bible has several examples of those who were persecuted. Tens of thousands of early Quakers were persecuted for their faith, some to the point of death through hanging or horrifying prison conditions. George Fox was imprisoned at least eight times, and Margaret Fell was imprisoned for four years for having Quaker meetings in her home as well as refusing to swear an oath of allegiance to the crown. Several epistles in the Bible were written by Paul while he was incarcerated for going against the status quo of the Roman Empire. Going against empires had consequences throughout history, and they have consequences today.

Most notably, Jesus lived a short life full of trials and persecutions. We don't serve a God who demands us to not be afraid who cannot empathize with what it is like to be terrorized, abused, abandoned, betrayed, falsely accused, and tortured to death.

Gibson comments in "The Lord of Psalm 23": "The execution of our shepherd as the climax of his lifelong experience of the valley of the shadow of death is the supreme example in Scripture of how God so often leads his children: 'You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good (Gen. 50:20). The shepherd who leads was led out to die by sinful men; this path to death was God's road to a world of unimaginable good. This underlying profound belief in the sovereignty of the shepherd and his providential care at every step of the way is why David sings of walking 'through' the valley. *Through*. Your valley right now, however its oppressive walls are formed - from depression to death or a thousand other kinds of darkness besides, is not the destination but the journey. For the Lord Jesus, his path was the humiliation of his incarnation and the cross of his atoning death, and then the crown; for us too the road of walking with our shepherd is suffering now, then glory after. But whatever the valley, you are walking *through* it. Jesus is not up ahead asking you for directions. He is not lost. He knows where he is leading you. He knows there is a way through it and out of it because that was his own experience of the valley; he has been there ahead of you and for you" (pp. 68-69).

Lesson 2: I don't have to fear evil because God is present and His rod and staff comforts me

Psalm 23 acknowledges that we are surrounded by evil. It also states that God's rod and staff is a comfort, but it does not guarantee that we will not experience physical, spiritual or emotional harm from others.

Several years back I walked through a very dark valley. I was a part of a different faith community for several years. I feel comfortable sharing this now because I no longer have connections with anyone from this specific community, and I will not be sharing names or specific information. In this season of life I was in graduate school while navigating being a new mother, experiencing abuse at home, and being spiritually abused by the faith community I was a part of. I challenged the pastor on his stance that mothers who worked who didn't have to to survive were selfish. I was accused of making false statements, even when I presented evidence, and I was made to feel like a liar and an instigator, and the entire church turned on me. Myself and another woman who expressed concern to the pastor were told that we were under a Jezebel spirit, and while our names were anonymous, most in the church knew who the pastor was talking about when he wrote an entire sermon about how his leadership was being attacked by a couple of Jezebel-driven women. Like any unhealthy system that reacts when its authority is questioned, we were shunned. Even though I was a part of that small community for years, no one ever reached out to me. I never went to that church again, it took a long time to go to any church, and I spent many months processing this experience with my Christian therapist, who helped me to understand that this was spiritual abuse. God used my therapist to help guide me in the dark valley.

Sometimes God's staff guides us to new places, and His rod protects us from people we didn't know we needed protection from. If we refuse to listen to this guidance, we may end up being eaten by wolves. It can be scary to go to new places, but God may take us on a journey to greener pastures. The grass isn't always greener on the other side, but sometimes it is. The journey to green pastures may take us through a dark valley that cannot be avoided. Walking through a process of reconstruction, change, grief, loss, rejection, and other difficult experiences may be required, but we can be comforted knowing that God is there and is leading us to somewhere better. As my favorite verse states: "I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9).

When Jesus was about to be stoned by the Jews for blasphemy, He stated that His sheep know His voice (John 10:27-28). How do we know that we are on the right path listening to the Good Shepherd's voice when many conflicting and competing messages are told by people who claim that God is speaking through them and that they have the ultimate truth?

One way we can discern is asking ourselves if whatever message we are listening to produces fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Ephesians 5:22).

We can also discern that we are being guided by the shepherd's staff by discerning principles laid out in Romans 12. In my Bible the section is titled: "Marks of the True Christian":

- Are we loving what is genuine, holding fast to what is good and hating what is evil?
- Are we loving each other with mutual affection and outdoing each other in showing honor?
- Are we ardent in spirit and serving the Lord?
- Do we contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers?
- Are we blessing those who persecute us and not cursing people, and avoiding repaying evil for evil?
- Are we rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep?
- Do we live in harmony with each other and associate with the lowly?
- Do we try our best to live as peacefully with others as possible?
- Do we feed our enemies and overcome evil with good?

If a community or teacher is not aligning with these principles, it would be wise to reconsider what voice we are listening to.

We must also remember that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, and against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12). What happens when those who have authority, power and control place us in the valley of the shadow of death?

Many people are walking in this valley, and many people are terrified. Rights are being taken away or threatened to. Some sheep, including lambs, are starving and getting bombed, especially the brown ones. Black sheep are, as always, treated like black sheep - inferior and unwelcome. Lambs are being separated from their parents and placed in cages with abhorrent conditions. Ewes are being told to go to the back of the line again, to stay in their place and stop baa-ing and let the rams do the talking. Here's your red cape. Blessed be the fruit.

Even if we do end up walking in the valley of the shadow of The Handmaid's Tale, we know the one antidote to fear: love. God is love. Death, life, angels, rulers, things in the present and things to come, nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39). What can man do to me when the Lord is on my side? (Psalm 118:6)

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." (1 John 4:17-21). As a flock, let us lean on each other, love each other, protect and advocate for each other, and welcome all.