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Sermon: “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” (Psalm 23:4)
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It’s a Friday night in April 1994 and your wife has just given birth to a beautiful baby girl, an adorable seven-pound blessing from God. You’re so happy that you’re literally laughing and crying at the same time—and you notice that she has your eyes. You start phoning your family and friends to share the good news.

After awhile however the joy quickly turns to stress as you notice the doctors and nurses glancing at each other with concern. “What’s wrong?” you ask them. “We’re concerned about her breathing,” they respond as they whisk her out of the delivery room. Later that night they tell you they’re rushing her in an ambulance to Children’s Hospital in Washington D.C. You’re denied permission to ride in the ambulance and so you kiss your sobbing wife goodbye and get in your Toyota.

It’s pouring rain. As you’re driving you’re praying and crying and cursing and then telling God you’re sorry for cursing and then you pray and cry and curse some more. You wish you had windshield wipers for your eyes.

It’s about 3:30 in the morning when you arrive at Children’s Hospital and the security guard tells you how to get to the NICU. You step off the elevator, enter the unit and ask a nurse for help. Within a few minutes a doctor emerges and escorts you into a small waiting room. She’s compassionate and kind and soft-spoken, but she asks you to sit down. You know that’s never a good sign.

She tells you that your daughter has severe Respiratory Distress Syndrome, and that she will probably not survive—and that if she somehow does survive she will spend months in the hospital and will most likely have a host of life-long mental and physical problems. It’s too much to take in. As you struggle without success to maintain your composure you ask if you can see her.

You don a light blue protective gown and mask and latex gloves, and are led into the NICU. In the back section where the most critically ill babies are you find your baby girl.

She’s on her back, head to the side, a tube running down her throat and into her tiny struggling lungs, monitors attached to her chest and head, various lines attached to veins in her arms, head, and even her belly-button.

Her brow is furrowed and you see an intense look in her brown eyes. You spread your fingers apart and try to avoid the monitors and lines as you gently place your fingertips on her little
body, which is vibrating like a washing machine because the oxygen pump is turned all the way up.

You’re in the valley of the shadow of death and you’re more scared and more helpless and more out of control than you have ever been in your life and you do the only thing you can do… you pray, you ask God to help.

 Apparently God does help because your baby girl not only survives but goes on to lead a healthy and happy childhood. When you watch her play sports you can still occasionally glimpse the same intensity in her furrowed brow.

Each year on her birthday you thank God anew and give her an extra long hug because you never forget how it felt to be in the valley of the shadow of death. The years fly by and all of the sudden it’s the morning of her eighteenth birthday and you’re driving to worship at Christ Episcopal Church 😊.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year on this Sunday we are reminded that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who is always with us—even in the valley of the shadow of death. With that in mind today I’m preaching from the fourth verse of Psalm 23, a psalm written by David.

Knowing about the circumstances during which something was written can help us appreciate it more. For example, knowing Beethoven was deaf when he composed his Ninth Symphony or knowing Harper Lee wrote To Kill a Mockingbird during the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement can help us appreciate those masterpieces even more. This is certainly the case with Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 was not written during a peaceful time in King David’s life, when everything was going well and everyone liked him and it was a perfect sunny day and he was lounging about with a harp watching sheep as they idyllically grazed. King David wrote Psalm 23 in the latter years of his life and in the midst of extreme stress.

The cause of this extreme stress was family dysfunction—some things never change 😊. David had several wives and multiple children and therefore multiplied family dysfunction as well. By one wife he had a son named Absalom and a daughter named Tamar. By another wife he had a son named Amnon. Amnon violated Tamar, and Tamar’s brother Absalom was furious. Absalom didn’t speak to Amnon for two years, and then succeeded in his conspiracy to have him killed while inebriated at a party—which incidentally is why you should never go to the Foxfield Races with a brother who is really mad at you 😊.

Absalom fled Jerusalem and stayed away for three years, after which he returned and wanted to be reconciled with his father, but his father refused to see him for another two years. Finally Absalom was allowed to see his father, who kissed him.
It appeared that Absalom and his father David were now reconciled, but it was a front. For the next four years Absalom conspired against David and won over the hearts of the military and civil leaders of Israel. Then he went to Hebron and while there the nation of Israel proclaimed Absalom as king. Word came to David that Absalom and the armies of Israel were heading to Jerusalem to kill him, so David, the great king of Israel, fled Jerusalem with his servants. As he fled some people along the road cursed him and threw stones at him.

When Absalom arrived at Jerusalem he moved into the palace vacated by David—and to add insult to injury he pitched a tent on the roof of the palace in which he slept with his father David’s concubines for all to see.

Later Absalom led an army to seek out his father David and kill him—but in the meantime many Israelites had rallied behind David in the wilderness. When it came time for battle David ordered his generals, “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” But instead as they defeated all who had revolted against King David they violently killed Absalom.

When David received news of Absalom’s death, he wept and cried out again and again, “O my son, Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

It was while the humiliated King David was in the wilderness fleeing his son Absalom that he wrote Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 is one of the best known and best loved passages of the Bible. One could preach a whole series of sermons on each verse, sermons about how God makes us lie down in green pastures or leads us beside still waters or revives our souls or guides us along the right paths. But today I am going to focus on verse four, which assures us that the Lord is our shepherd even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Psalm 23 was written to comfort and encourage individuals who are in the wilderness. Intentional, literal outings to the wilderness can be invigorating and inspiring, but unintentional, figurative wilderness seasons in your life can be scary.

One of my favorite seminary professors was Tim Laniak, without question one of the smartest people I know. We still keep in touch. Tim grew up in New England and earned his doctorate at Harvard, which of course makes him “wicked smart” 😊. He was also compassionate. One semester I had fallen way behind in my Hebrew studies and completely bombed a quiz. When I received my quiz back Tim had wryly written, “Definitely not a keeper” next to the low score, and he mercifully dropped the grade.

While on sabbatical Tim spent a year in the Middle East living in the wilderness with Bedouin shepherds, and he wrote a devotional book based on his experiences entitled *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*. Listen to how Tim describes the effect the wilderness has on people:
“Deserts bring people quickly to the end of their self-sufficiency and independence… Our lives can become a wilderness when experiences expose our frail and tenuous existence. Episodes of bewilderment, abandonment, and inner terror reveal our soul’s restless cravings and fundamental neediness. In the wilderness we can lose our bearings” (p. 24-25).

Sometimes the wilderness can be very dark. In verse four of Psalm 23 we read, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me.”

The phrase “shadow of death” is actually a mild translation. David is not referring to passing shadows or twilight; he is referring to total darkness.

When I was little I was terrified of the dark. I had a Donald Duck nightlight that was always on. If I woke up scared in the middle of the night, Donald Duck was always right there, shining away—maybe I need to spend some time with a therapist unpacking that…. Some people never get over their fear of the dark.

A number of years when I was in my twenties (so I guess that’s quite a number of years ago 😊) I led an outdoor adventure camp for about thirty high school students. We spent the week mountain biking, rock climbing, whitewater rafting, hiking, and caving—or, spelunking. At one point while we were spelunking we reached a place deep inside a mountain. Our guide asked all of us to turn our flashlights and helmet lights off. We did, and within seconds it was absolutely pitch dark. You literally could not even see your hand in front of you. It was quite unnerving. Of course, within few seconds the kids all started making weird noises and off-color remarks and so we turned our lights back on and continued, but I’ll never forget how that absolute darkness felt.

And in every one of our lives we experience moments, or sometimes even seasons, of absolute darkness. No one is immune. The 16th century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross famously referred to this kind of experience as a “dark night of the soul.” The brilliant 20th century poet T. S. Eliot describes this in his *Four Quartets*:

“O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark.”

On one level this darkness is the literal darkness of death; on another level it is the figurative darkness during which you cannot see anything at all.
But you’re not alone in the darkness. The Lord is right there with you, and that means you don’t have to be afraid—“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me.” Even if you are afraid of the dark, God is not, and He is still with you.

One of my favorite writers is Cormac McCarthy. His Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Road* is about a father and son trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic nightmare of a world. At one point in the story after resting for awhile one afternoon the father decides they need to continue walking down the road:

> We’re okay, (the father) said. Come on.

> (His son asked) Is the dark going to catch us?

> I don’t know.

> It is, isn’t it?

> Come on. We’ll hurry.

> The dark did catch them. By the time they reached the headland path it was too dark to see anything. They stood in the wind from off the sea with the grass hissing all about them, the boy holding his hand. We just have to keep going, the man said. Come on.

> I can’t see (the boy said).

> I know. We’ll just take it one step at a time.

> Okay.

> Don’t let go.

> Okay.

> No matter what.

> No matter what (p. 233).

The Lord your shepherd is with you no matter what. And even if you let go of his hand, He never lets go of yours.

The Lord is your shepherd, especially in the valley of the shadow of death.

In the New Testament we see an even deeper meaning for Psalm 23. In the Gospel According to John Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd: “I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11). Eventually the dark did catch Jesus.
In his suffering and death Jesus entered into the “dark dark dark” of human depravity and sin, and bore the price of that sin, death, in our place.

The Roman soldiers were not gentle with Jesus as they violently killed Him, and as he died perhaps God the Father echoed King David: “O my son, Jesus, my son, my son Jesus! Would I had died instead of you, O Jesus, my son, my son!”

On the cross Jesus the Good Shepherd did what he said he would do, he laid down his life for the sheep, including you. He not only dropped all the lowest grades in your life, he dropped all the grades in your life.

On the cross Jesus the Good Shepherd took the place of the lost and sinful sheep, and became a lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The 17th century hymnist Johann Heermann expressed it this way:

Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered;  
the slave hath sinned and the Son hath suffered  
For our atonement while we nothing heeded  
God interceded  
(From “Ah Holy Jesus,” Hymn 158 in the 1982 Episcopal Hymnal).

One more illustration…in the mid fifties a fourteen year old boy lost his mother to cancer. The combination of his mother’s death and his father’s grief rattled his faith to the core. About twelve years later, now in his late twenties, he had a dream one night in which his mother appeared to him and comforted him with the words, “It will be all right, just let it be.” The boy was Paul McCartney, his mother’s name was Mary, and the song this dream inspired is the Beatles classic, Let It Be, a song that resonates on a deep level with people who feel like they are in the dark:

When I find myself in times of trouble  
Mother Mary comes to me  
Speaking words of wisdom  
Let it be  
And in my hour of darkness  
She is standing right in front of me  
Speaking words of wisdom  
Let it be
So today if you are in one way or another in the valley of the shadow of death, disoriented in the wilderness and at the end of your self-sufficiency and independence, perhaps more scared and more helpless and more out of control than you have ever been before, be encouraged.

The Lord is still your shepherd, and he will always be with you, especially in your hour of darkness.

No matter what.

And at the end of Psalm 23 we see that one day the darkness will be over, and you will find yourself in the house of the Good Shepherd who will stand right in front of you and wipe every tear from your eyes, and you “will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Amen.