

Pastor Mark A. Cordes
 July 16, 2017 – PENTECOST 6

Psalm 23:4a
 CW 436

“Though I Walk Through the Valley...”

- ☞ The best route
- ☞ Refreshment on the way

In the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, dear sheep:

This past week I received several calls “returning your call.” But I did not call them. None were telemarketers about storm damage. In fact, one woman was scared I had called about her brother in a local hospital with terminal cancer. That was an opportunity to share God’s love with her, including these words from Psalm 23: **Though I Walk Through the Valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.** In life’s extremes we really need this consolation for our souls. Our Good Shepherd helps us prepare for the worst, hoping for the best. We say with confidence: **“The LORD is my Shepherd** – my protection and prosperity depend entirely on Him. And even in the worst possible circumstances, **Though I Walk Through the Valley** of shadows dark and deadly, the LORD my Shepherd knows **The best route** and how to provide **Refreshment on the way.** I’m safe with Him because His loving skill only takes...”

☞ The best route

Up to this point in Psalm 23, it’s as if a sheep has been boasting across the fence to his neighbor about how wonderful a Shepherd the LORD is. But now it’s time for the sheep to follow his Shepherd to the high country to escape the summer heat. They will follow the melting snows to the alpine pastures above the tree line. And late in the summer as early autumn sets in, the swirling snows and freezing temperatures will push them slowly back down to the sheep pen on the home ranch. The long summer trek up and back again will give the sheep a chance to be very close to the Shepherd. So from now until the end of the Psalm the language is much more intimate. Instead of “My Shepherd, He does this or that,” we find, “You, Shepherd, are with me. You feed me. You care for me” – intimate, close companionship.

The sheep doesn’t know where they are going as it leaves the familiar confines of “home.” But the skillful shepherd knows. He has been this way before. His sheep have never had to sweat through a summer like the neighbor’s sheep across the fence. The shepherd has experienced the cool of the high country. It’s worth the walk away from the sultry valley below. He knows the dangers along the trail, but he prepares safeguards and precautions to ensure their safe arrival in the quiet grandeur above.

For us sheep this seems to be the worst case scenario, leaving the comfort and safety “down home” for the dangers and darkness of the valleys on the way to the high country. But do we really want to balk at following the Shepherd’s voice? Hasn’t He always led us and cared for us with skill and devotion? Is this not the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep? He wants to bring us into a closer walk with God. Can we really expect to be air lifted from the lowlands to the mountaintop experiences of faith?

*Must I be carried to the skies’
 On flow’ry beds of ease?
 While others fought to win the prize
 And sailed through bloody seas?*

*Are there no foes for me to face?
 Must I not stem the flood?
 Is this vile world a friend to grace
 To help me on to God? (TLH 445:2,3)*

¹ Keller, Philip. *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Zondervan Publ. House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970. Available from NPH, 1-800-662-6022. Also at Amazon / Audible Books. Sixth in Summer Sermon Series by Pastor Mark A. Cordes.

Even modern highway builders know that **The best route** up the mountain is through the valleys on its sides. So the Good Shepherd must lead His sheep to the summit and high mountain meadows by passing through dark valleys. In our lives these look like financial reverses, loss of job, and even death of a loved one. Philip Keller's wife went on to "higher ground" with God. They were passing through the dark valley together for two years as cancer destroyed her body. In his book Keller reminds us that we are walking "**Through the Valley.**" We don't die here. It's not a "dead end street." We are just passing **through** to the sunlight and the cool, refreshing air of God above. As God works out everything for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28), He knows that the easiest, gentlest way to the top lies through the valleys. And each time we follow Jesus **through** another dark valley we grow more confident in His tender, loving care.

☞ Refreshment on the way

Summertime trails can be hot, dry and dusty. Philip Keller recalls one summer when 10,000 sheep were passing through their ranch. Their shepherds requested permission to water them at the river. Keller's "Yes," sent the sheep running for **Refreshment. Refreshment on the way** means survival.

Friends, how would we ever discover the coolness of God's love if we never got thirsty **on the way**? Without his wife's death how would Philip Keller have known "the strength, solace and serene outlook imparted to [him] virtually hour after hour by the presence of God's gracious Spirit Himself" (p. 86)? And who is better able to comfort the bereaved than one who has suffered **through** the valley to the other side? Sometimes God uses the valleys of our own lives to be the riverbed of cool, refreshing comfort to other sheep. Should we then tremble entering a new valley? Should we lie down as if we'll never get out? Should we worry and fret if our life seems like one dark valley after another? Or should we quietly sing:

*Savior, I follow on, Guided by Thee,
Seeing not yet the hand That leadeth me.
Hushed be my heart and still, Fear I no further ill,
Only to meet Thy will My will shall be. (TLH 422:1)*

Sometimes the only route to the top lies through a valley so deep and narrow that the sun rarely reaches the floor except for a few hours in the heat of the day. But the Good Shepherd knows where the grass is green and the water fresh and clear. The rich refreshment of His Word and Sacrament grows lush and green in the valleys of our lives. This alone can satisfy our soul. Predators like coyotes and mountain lions may lurk in the rocks above. Storms may sweep down on the mountain. Surprisingly, even with all their wool sheep are thin-skinned creatures who can die quickly if sudden storms leave them shivering on a high mountain in July. Lightning, floods can flash, but Shepherd is always with me **Through the Valley.**

<i>It's all right. I'm okay. My Shepherd Jesus knows the way. You know the way. You've been here before – leading me to heaven's door. You warn me too of danger and sin By your Word and Spirit living within.</i>	<i>Financial reverses? Sorrow and death? I know I'm safe and every breath I hear your promise strong and true: "I'll never leave nor forsake you."</i>
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"Dear Shepherd of my heart, I look back with gratitude at the skillful, loving way you have guided me in the past. I look ahead with confidence, secure and certain that beyond the dark shadows of this valley lie lush green meadows above to walk ever closer with you. LORD, my Shepherd, I don't ask *whether* I can cope, but only "*How? How shall I pass through the calamities that come my way?*" By your Word and Sacraments, O LORD, even in the deepest, darkest, deadliest valley, help me to follow you in hope – safe and secure. In Jesus' precious Name. Amen."