

OPENING PRAYER

Wonderful and Gracious God, some of us come to you weary from the stress and strain of our days, seeking the rest that only you can give. Some of us come doubting or lukewarm in faith, seeking Your spiritual guidance.

But whatever our condition of mind, heart, or spirit, we come giving thanks that You accept and welcome us, and in Your transforming love, are even now changing the old clothing of our souls for new. We open ourselves to Your working within and among us, as we lift our spirits into the light of Your Holy Presence, and our voices in praise and thanks for all that You do for us. As You are present with us O God, help us be present to You. Guide and lead us and help us to follow You that we might be both blessed and a blessing to You.

Gracious Shepherd forgive us for any wrongdoing in our lives and hear our prayers for all those in our church family or in our community who have heavy hearts or are suffering in body, mind, or soul.

We continue to pray for the doctors, nurses, caregivers who are working tirelessly against this terrible virus. We ask that You will keep them safe. Give them the energy, the wisdom and the strength they need to hold us through these days.

You are an amazing God and we love You and we continue to trust in You as we pray the words You have given us:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

JOHN 10:22-30

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. The Jews gathered around Him, saying, "How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for Me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I

give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

SERMON: PSALM 23

*Loving God, as You opened the tomb and raised Jesus to new life, so open our hearts and minds by the power of Your Holy Spirit that as Your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what You say to us, and in confidence go forth to live what You show us. We ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen.*

The 23rd Psalm is probably the best known, most loved, most quoted portion of Scripture. It is so familiar that people who seldom if ever read a Bible or go to church can often still quote a portion of this Psalm.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for you are with me.
Your rod and thy staff they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies,
You anoint my head with oil,
My cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

One problem, though, is since this Psalm is so often requested at death-beds and funerals, we too often associate the 23rd Psalm with death and dying. But this Psalm is really for the living. It speaks to the living; those who are fully alive in the true sense of the word.

A person who was in a bad accident years ago that left him a semi-invalid talked about the many nights he cried himself to sleep; about the pain that racked his body as he was sinking into deep depression.

He said: "All my life whenever I was in trouble, I had turned to God for help. I remembered my Bible and asked the nurse to get the one from the drawer in the night table. I opened it to the 23rd Psalm:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me."

"From that moment on", he said, "I was on my way back. I knew I was going to make it!"

There are hundreds and thousands of testimonies like this; of how people have found in this simple Psalm the comfort, strength, and the assurance that they are going to make it!

I'm sure many of you can tell your own stories about what this psalm has meant to you.

Psalm 23 not only gives comfort to the dying, it also gives courage, strength, and hope to those who are alive.

One of the things we realize, though, is that the 23rd Psalm is steeped in the language and customs of shepherding and sheep in Palestine back in Bible times. If we don't know anything about the customs of shepherds and the unique relationship between the good shepherd and the sheep, then much of what this Psalm has to say to us simply passes us by.

What I am going to do this morning is focus on just one small part of the Psalm - verse 4: ***Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and thy staff they comfort me.***

Tradition tells us that the Valley of the Shadow of Death is a real place in Israel. It is a valley, or a mountain pass, that got its name from shepherds because of its steep sides and sheer rock walls. But it was a pass that enabled the shepherds to lead their sheep from one mountain pasture to another. However, it was a terrifying place for skittish, defenceless, fearful sheep: for in the steep cliffs on both sides of the valley there were numerous caves and rocks and crevices that were perfect hiding place for animals of prey and for people who meant harm to

passing travellers. Sounds would echo and amplify in the valley, making it a terrifying place for sheep.

We look at the Psalm and hear: ***The Lord is my shepherd. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me by still water. He leads me in paths of righteousness.***

But now the sheep are in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Question: How did they get there?

We have to assume that the Good Shepherd has led the sheep into the valley.

Now, the images in this Psalm are clear. The shepherd is the Lord.

Indeed, we read in the Bible that Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd.

The shepherd is the Lord. And, of course, we are the sheep.

And what is the Valley of the Shadow of Death?

It is those terrifying, dark, lonely, frightening times in life; times of sickness, tragedy, emotional stress, tension, economic disaster, loneliness, when God may seem far away.

Does that sound like what we are living through today? Have you had times of frustration, loneliness, uncertainty, emotional stress over the last weeks? I know there have been times when I have asked "When is this ever going to end?"

But we see here that it is the Good Shepherd who leads the sheep (us) into the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

But we must remember that the shepherd has a purpose: The shepherd takes the sheep from pastures that are now eaten up and barren, where food is scarce and the land is parched, to new lush, green meadows. But to get there, the shepherd and the sheep must pass through the valley.

The sheep don't understand this.

The sheep cannot comprehend the purposes of the shepherd.

All that the sheep experience are the frightening, terrifying surroundings.

But the shepherd knows. The shepherd has a reason, a purpose. And the sheep have learned to trust the shepherd.

As Jesus said,

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

Yes, the sheep have grown to trust the shepherd.

The shepherd has proven trustworthy and so the sheep follow the shepherd even through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, ***"fearing no evil."***

And so, it is with the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, who leads us through troubled and difficult times of life. But He has a reason, a purpose; to lead us to greener pastures, to deeper faith. He calls us to trust in Him; to put our faith in Him, even when we cannot always see His plan or purpose.

But we trust the Good Shepherd, because we know the shepherd is trustworthy.

Another thing we need to realize is that there is a world of difference between death and the shadow of death. The shadow may be frightening, dark, and cold, but they are just shadows, not the real thing.

What is death?

Death, real death, is separation from the awareness of God's love and grace. Death is being afraid of God.

It doesn't matter how strong or healthy and safe or secure you may think you are, if you live outside of the love of God, if God is someone you do not know or have come to fear, then you are among the living dead. You are living in death.

But St. Paul tells us that Christ has taken up our death into life; into the resurrection life prepared for all who trust in Him.

Do you remember when Jesus came to the tomb of his good friend, Lazarus, and He met his sisters, Mary and Martha, how Jesus said,

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die."

The promise that we as Christians have every day of our lives is that we will never die. We will never be separated from the love of God that we have through Jesus Christ.

But there will be those times when we experience the valley of the shadow of death.

There will be those times when we might feel forsaken, abandoned, alone, and rejected; those troubled times when we may wonder where God is.

The valley of the shadow of death are those times when we feel forsaken, but by faith we know that we are not, because we have both God's promise, and the experience of God's grace and His love for us throughout the past.

When we are in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, we may feel as if God is far away, but deep down inside we can know that God is very near. God promises us life; life in this world, and life in the world to come. Christians don't die. God

simply calls us from one life to another. But as long as we live in this world of sin and suffering, we will experience the shadow of death.

And that can be a terrifying experience for us. At that time, it is good to recall how the Good Shepherd is leading us to green pastures where He will restore our souls. It is good to remember that He is preparing a table for me; a table that contains the bread of heaven and the wine of everlasting and abundant joy.

Listen to the voice of the shepherd when you are in the valley of the shadow of death. Listen and know that He is leading to a better place.

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you, O Lord, are with me. Your rod and your staff comfort me.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Blessed be the name of our God, now and forevermore.

Amen

Let us pray:

Loving God, we give You thanks that we are not alone. That You are here as our God, our Shepherd, and our friend. We thank You and we pray to You for ourselves and our world with thanksgiving and with hope.

Gracious God, You care for me; I need nothing more.

Hear the cry of those who are hungry; hungry for justice and dignity; hungry for freedom and love; hungry for the bread of both heaven and of earth.

Caring God, You lead me into a haven of peace and rest.

Hear the cry of those who are alone; those who grieve a relationship broken by death or human failing, those who live in the isolation of a hospital room, a prison cell, a frail body, a confused mind.

Generous God, You breath new life into me and lead me in new ways.

We pray for a just and caring use of your creation and a fair sharing of its abundance,

Compassionate God, You are with me and comfort me, even when the darkness of the world looms large.

We pray for those who seek the truth; those who cannot speak, and those who cannot be heard, that the light of Your Word may shine in the darkness which overshadows their lives.

Merciful God, In the face of those things that trouble me, You provide for me, and pour out your blessings.

Hear the cry of those trampled by racial or religious intolerance; those disoriented by homelessness, and those defeated by unemployment.

God of healing and wholeness, You are with me always and have promised to sustain me all my life. Enlarge our vision of life and make us bold in our hope.

Thank You, God, for all that You do for us and for Your unending love and care.

We ask all these things in Your precious name.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Go in peace and love and care for one another in the name of Christ Jesus knowing that God is your shepherd and that you are His people.

May God comfort you with His rod and His staff.

May the Lord Jesus call you and lead you each and every day.

May the Holy Spirit tend with goodness and love, till at last you sit at the table of God in the house that He has prepared for all His people.

Amen