**Coronado Community Church**

“Walking Through the Valley”

Psalm 23

A sermon by Pastor Eric Smith

March 19, 2023

Fred Craddock, one of the great preachers of the 20th century, told this story...

I went to see a lady in our church who was facing surgery. I went to see her in the hospital. She had never been in the hospital before, and the surgery was major. I walked in there. She was a nervous wreck, and she started crying. She wanted me to pray with her, which I did. By her bed there was a stack of books and magazines: *True Love, Mirror, Hollywood Today,* stuff about celebrities and folk. She had a stack of them there… and she was a wreck.

It occurred to me, *there’s not a calorie in that whole stack to help her through her experience.* She had no place to dip down into a reservoir and come up with something – a word, a phrase, a thought, an idea, a memory, a person. Just empty.

Then Craddock wrote…

How marvelous is the life of the person who, like a wise homemaker, when the berries and fruits and vegetables are ripe, puts them away in jars and cans in the cellar. Then when the ground is cold, icy, and barren and nothing seems alive, she goes down into the cellar, comes up, and it’s May and June at her family’s table.

How blessed is that person.

Familiarity with Psalm 23 is like having jars and cans in the cellar…

Throughout my adult life there have been two kinds of occasions when I have either listened to, or recited, the 23rd Psalm. The first doesn’t happen as much anymore – I used to hear it and say it with each of our children at bedtime. I taught it to them as one of their prayers before they went to sleep each night. I did that with one and then the next, sometimes together, for more than 20 years. I commend the practice to parents and grandparents.

Well – the kids are grown up. Now I anticipate the chance to do this with the grandkids… periodically.

The other kind of occasion where I hear or say the comforting words of this Psalm is during memorial services and inurnments. It’s not always a part of each service – but more often than not it is requested as a scripture reading; and if the family asks me to pick the scriptures, I will always choose Psalm 23.

I love the image of sheep in green pastures.

A few years ago Karen and I traveled to New Zealand to visit with my sister and her family and to see the wonders of that land. It is a beautiful place with incredible landscape features. One of New Zealand’s lesser-touted wonders is that, as regards population, there are twelve sheep for every person.

One can learn a great deal about the relationship of sheep to the kiwi culture and kiwi economy with a visit to the “Agrodome” in the city of Rotorua.

It is an agricultural theme park with, on the one hand, many extreme sports opportunities (like bungee jumping and zip lines… and, on the other, lots of information about

* sheep,
* sheep herding,
* sheep dogs,
* varieties of sheep,
* and sheep shearing

…more information provided than most of us would ever think of to ask.

Shortly after our arrival at the Agrodome I noticed a certain pungency in the air. I was reminded of a comment made about sheep by a fellow pastor who had grown up raising and tending them. He commented about sheep in a sermon he preached on this Psalm. He said, simply… sheep stink.

Knowing his sense of humor, it was never clear to me whether his comment was intended literally, or metaphorically, or both!

Psalm 23 is the best known of all the Psalms. It assures us of God’s presence and care …and those words give us comfort.

The *themes* include trust, guidance, healing and restoration, protection, comfort, and assurance.

The *scenes* of the 23rd Psalm include green pastures, still waters, banquet tables… and one more… the King James translation of the Bible calls it, *the valley of the shadow of death.*

That describes some of the passages during our lives. We have mountaintop experiences, we know the day-to-day joys and choices and trials of our journeys. But there is also the valley… that valley; a place where we go down… where there is shadow.

Most of you know exactly what I’m talking about because you’ve been there. Sometimes it is a visit long anticipated, sometimes you go there suddenly and unexpectedly. You never really know how long you will stay when you descend into that valley.

Grief most often sends us there. We lose a loved one. We lose a spouse, or a grandparent, or a parent, or a sibling, or a child. The loss of a friend will send us there – or the loss of any person or people to whom we feel connected.

Other things send us down, and we tend not to be as aware of these circumstances:

* the loss of a job,
* moving away from a place we have known,
* an illness of our own or someone close,
* a divorce…
* any number of changes that are unwelcome to us can bring on a descent to the shadowed place.
* The realization that our lives are not going like we hoped

The valley of the shadow of death is not a place we choose to visit. But along life’s journey, we find ourselves there.

Sometimes we realize we’re there and we know how we got there. Karen and I spent a long time in the valley during a two year period when we lost three of our parents. We lived there for awhile. You’ve done that, too.

When you know you are in the valley and why you are there you also know that you won’t be there forever.

 Trust the shepherd. You are in the care of the one who called you into being, who formed you within your mother’s womb, the One who goes with you through all of your days and is there to welcome you when you pass from this life to the next. We trust God.

Another equally spiritual, but less biblical way to say it is like this – the universe is on your side. You are a creation of the loving movement of the spirit of the universe. You have been nurtured, you have been supported, and you are sustained by love. There is nothing that can separate you from the love of the universe.

I want to tell you a story of a family whose lives startlingly and dramatically went astray from the journey that they thought they were on.

Rick and Tina Bell had two beautiful teenagers, Christine and Neil. They lived in South Pasadena – we did, too. Christine played on Robyn’s ( she’s number 3) water polo team at South Pasadena high school.

Rick, who was my age, was diagnosed with cancer. The family was stunned, but there is a lot of hope for cancer patients. Rick soon began a course of chemotherapy.

The first course didn’t slow the disease, so he began a second course of treatment. It didn’t slow the disease, either.

The Bell family realized that Rick, husband and father, was going to die.

I have seen a lot of families deal with, or not deal with, this kind of stark reality. I had never seen a family like the Bells.

Rick went in the hospital several times. His lung collapsed. This disease was at the point of a rapid degeneration, so he wasn’t going be around much longer.

Tina called. She asked if we, as a family, would join them for Christine’s baptism. It was going to be conducted in her father’s hospital room with members of the family and a few close friends.

So we went, Lindsay, Robyn, Karen, and I. We were privileged to participate in one of God’s holy moments. God’s grace is in the sacraments; in communion and in baptism. God’s grace showed up in a big way this time.

Picture the scene: where a man lay in his hospital bed, and is in the last days before dying. Fifteen family members and friends squeeze into the one-bed hospital room.

The Bells were longtime members of their home church, so their pastor conducted the baptism. He brought water from the River Jordan. He told about the tradition of baptism and its meaning. He choked on his tears in telling us how it was so poignant to baptize Christine into the hope of eternal life while her father was about to enter into the reality of it.

So Christine sat next to her father, on his hospital bed, and was baptized.

No dry eyes present. None of us were happy, but all were joyful… in the deepest sense of joy.

When it was finished. We stood and talked with each other. Tina Bell called me into the hallway and said she wanted to share something.

She told me that they had been led. They were seeking God and finding answers to their prayers each day. Rick was going to die, the question was how were they all to deal with this as a family. This is what she shared with me…

First… a few weeks earlier Rick took Christine out to a father-daughter dinner. After dinner they went to their church. Rick told Christine that one of his greatest regrets in dying now was that he would not be able to walk her down the aisle at her wedding. So they lit the candles on the altar, and Rick walked her down the aisle of the church.

Rick also wanted to do something as meaningful with his 13 year old son, Neil. He and Tina thought and talked and prayed and finally got it. Father and son drove to the Rose Bowl parking lot, and for the next 2 hours Rick taught his son, Neil, how to drive.

The next week, before his lung collapsed, Tina asked Rick if there was anything that he wanted to do, that he had never done, before he died. He said, I’d like to ride down Pacific Coast Highway in a convertible with the top down. So they rented the hottest red Mustang convertible and took that cruise on Pacific Coast Highway.

As Tina shared these stories, in the other room Rick was in a hospital bed. Soon… too soon… Rick Bell would die. Yet in those moments we all sensed that somehow everyone would be alright. We would all soon cry together, (and we did) but everything that needed to be said had been said… everything that needed to be done had been done. The Bell family walked in the valley of the shadow death but they did so with hope. Not that Rick would be miraculously healed – but the hope that emerges out of deep connection with God.

They were a remarkable family… those Bells. I’ve not met anyone quite like them before. Their lives went astray. But it was okay.

Their daughter Christine graduated from UC Santa Cruz and is happily married.

Their son Neil is (in Robyn’s words) a big huge strapping good looking guy who graduated from Cal Berkeley.

Tina is a psychotherapist in South Pasadena.

Our truth is that there are times when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. There is no avoiding it, no going around it, there is no other path, the only way out of it is forward… keep walking. God always walks with you.