

## PSALM 23

### Expect the Unexpected

Psalm 23 is often read at funerals, where it offers a wonderful message of hope in the face of death. But this psalm offers just as much hope for facing life in this difficult and confusing time we live in.

I think that if life were a road, it would be littered with warning signs reading, “Blind curve ahead.” How do we respond to such uncertainty? Do we grip the steering wheel with white-knuckle intensity and expect the worst? Or do we step on the accelerator and barrel straight ahead? How do we face the uncertainties of our lives without some measure of anxiety?

King David, the author of this psalm, understood the meaning of the phrase, “Expect the unexpected.” He was the youngest son of a large farming family. When God called him into service, he was just a shepherd boy. He tended his father’s herd of sheep. But he ended up as the wealthy, powerful warrior-king who helped create the great state of Israel. Along the way, he restored the Ark of the Covenant to its rightful place and helped the people of Israel defeat their enemies. But he also experienced the shame of the sins he committed: taking another man’s wife and sending her husband into battle to die. Two of his sons will also die and his family will be broken.

King David’s life contained enough drama to keep a team of soap opera writers busy for years. Yet as David looked back over his life, he could not help but feel regret for his sins, but he also acknowledged that even in the face of the tragic sins he had committed, God had not abandoned him. He was able to see God’s hand at work in his life, guiding and protecting him along the way.

There was one theme that defined David’s life from start to finish: an unflinching trust in God’s goodness and mercy. And when this mighty and powerful king searched for an appropriate way to describe God’s divine care in his life, he called on a special memory from his childhood. His job of tending his father’s sheep.

Up until now most of us have experience times when God’s blessings have flowed very generously into our lives. Our loved ones are safe and healthy, our tummies are full, and most of our prayers have been answered. Life has been good, we have lived in peace, and we can come to church and sense God’s presence in our lives. But then we come to verse four of Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”

Unfortunately, we are not going to find “the valley of the shadow of death” on a map, because realistically we are surrounded by it. We are always living in the shadow of death. Yet God is still present and working in this world even in the presence of unknown viruses and uncertain economic futures. God is still finding a way to love us and care for us. These uncertain times are just temporary, and the writer of this psalm gives us the antidote for the anxiety which we live in by remembering one thing: God is always with us.

To know that we are never alone, to know that God’s presence and strength and comfort are always available to us, to know that God created us, and one day will redeem us, is the knowledge we need as an antidote to the anxiety we feel right now. This knowledge allows us to look beyond the temporary and concerning times we live in to a future that is full of certainty and hope. As the psalmist writes in verse 6: “Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” That is the promise of our faith. God’s love is an unfailing love, and one we can depend on even in the worst of times.

Nearly two thousand years ago, another man lived a life of high drama and heartbreak. He would become one of the greatest messengers of Christ in history, and would suffer greatly for his faith. His name was Paul. While under house arrest in Rome, Paul wrote these words to the Christians in Philippi: “. . . I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (Phil. 4: 11b-13)

Whatever kind of valley we may be going through in these days of uncertainty, we need to remember that the Lord is with us. We are not alone. And by His grace, we will make it through these times of confusion and disorientation. The Lord is our shepherd. We need not be afraid.

AMEN