

May 12, 2019

Sermon "The Psalmist Proclaims

Rev. Mark Moline

This morning's lectionary presents us with the striking and very familiar 23rd Psalm. One snag with such attractive and familiar readings is that we sometimes gloss over the words without reflecting upon their meaning or content. For instance; "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil." Note the wording. It's the valley of the Shadow of Death, not the Valley of Death, and the fear is the fear of evil, not the fear of death. I think the difference here is far more than mere semantics.

For the believer, our inevitable biological death is not evil. Death may be sad, it may be painful, unwelcome or it may come way too early, it may be tragic, but it is not spiritually evil. To be sure, in this life we do travel through valleys that have their spiritual evils. In some deaths the cause of the death may be evil, but the actual death itself is not. Because the Good Shepherd watches over us, we need no longer fear death – much less its mere shadow.

For as we pray in that prayer attributed to St. Francis: "It is in dying that we are born to eternal life." For the believer death is not the end, rather it's the front door of eternity. Because of the cross, ---- death is no longer a spiritual evil for us. It is just a shadow, not even a full eclipse, that we consider in our inevitable physical deaths. And yet, even without its sting, it still casts a large and ominous shadow across our valley.

Even as a defeated, powerless enemy, death stands looming there between us and the sun, between us and our source of light and life and presents each of us with something that we must physically and emotionally pass through to get to the full light. We don't see death without hope, we only see its murky shadow and naturally we may become anxious, but we need not be spiritually apprehensive.

The Shepherd does not want his sheep frightened, but neither does he require them to be absolutely fearless. He knows there are times when we will be frightened by the shadows. But as we walk that valley beside our shepherd – He is the fearless one, he is our protector – our savior. Quite simply put, our shepherd wants us to trust him and trust in his ability to nurture and protect us; not from biological death – but from evil.

There is no reason for the Christian believer to fear the shadow of death; but undeniably, we often do. I suspect that "to do so," is just human nature. Afterall, scripture does commonly liken humankind to sheep. And from what little I know about sheep; they are flighty and easily panicked.

In his poem entitled "Wasteland," T.S. Eliot writes, "And I will show you something different from either your shadow at morning striding behind you, or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; I will show you fear in a hand full of dust."

In the morning, --- perhaps meaning in our youth, we start our life's journey walking east toward the rising sun – toward the light and the truth, and we are at least aware of our shadow striding along behind us.

Then, in the evening, in our advanced years, the sun sits behind us in the west and we become more aware of the shadow as it rises up in front of us to meet us.

Then Eliot's poem abruptly leaves the shadow imagery. Afterall it did promise to show us something different. So, the poet does transition from the shadow imagery to the reality of dirt. And with the dust comes fear. At the graveside, the priest takes a handful of dust and cast it upon the coffin tracing the sign of the cross. Scattered dust doesn't leave behind much of a shadow, but it is more real than the darkest shadow.

There in the very face of reality we encounter physical death, and there in that reality we are left with a choice. We can either embrace our faith or we embrace our fear. That is the fear, I think, the Poet writes of and the psalmist most wants us to avoid. I shall fear no evil. Without the cross, without our faith, without our creator as our shepherd, death would be evil.

Indeed, the Lord is our shepherd!