

When we read Psalm 23, I suspect that our attention is riveted on one phrase: *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil.”*

I confess that I lean toward the older translation of *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”*

No matter which way you say it, it’s easier said than done, isn’t it?

But then, you look at who wrote these words. He said it because he had done it, David, who walked into the valley facing Goliath. He is simply telling us the truth of his own life.

And maybe not even that valley, the dark valley of the shadow in which he faced the evil of his own sin with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, the valley of the shadow when he faced the armed rebellion of his son Absalom.

We all have walked, are walking, will walk through those valleys, in the midst of the shadows...and it’s more than simply the reality of the moment of death.

I said in my prayer last week, and I was thinking of this passage, I said, “Some of us have walked through dark valleys this week, and all of us know someone in a dark valley, valleys of sickness, grief, uncertainty, depression, fear.

And some have not been able to come out of the darkness. The darkness has taken hold and they can’t find their way back to the light.”

This is the picture David paints with his words of a shepherd leading his flock through narrow and dark gorges on a twisting and winding path, shadowy fears of finding a way out.

It is a place where wild beasts lurk, lions and tigers and bears, where bandits prowl and lie in wait to assault those who walk that way.

In short, it is a place of danger. It is the real world of David the shepherd, the real world of David against Goliath, the real world of David the powerful pitiful king, the real world of David the despairing parent.

The question is not about whether it happens. It does.

Let’s be clear about what this verse does not say.

It does not say, “As I walk through the dark valleys, I will not be touched by evil; your rod and your staff will fend off any pain or suffering or bad things happening to me.”

No, the psalmist is very much to the point: “I will fear no evil...your rod and your staff comfort me.”

And that word ‘comfort’ carries the sense of consolation in times of grief.

It’s not a matter of protecting us from the evil or preventing the evil from happening; we all walk that valley.

What David is talking about for us is that God hears us as we cry out, God is near us as we walk on,

The thread that connects, that holds it together between ‘fear no evil’ and ‘comfort’ is David’s affirmation of faith: “You are with me.”

This is the root of Paul’s affirmation of faith as he walks through his own dark valley, writing from prison in his letter to the Philippians, “For God is at work in you...” and he knows it is true for him, too.

God’s protection is not to encircle us in plastic bubble wrap, but to embrace us in a powerful personal presence that penetrates our darkest moments with that peace that passes all understanding.

This Psalm is God's promise, as David knows the truth of it, no matter what the old hymn says, we do not walk that valley by ourselves.

"For you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

The rod and the staff, and I've heard all the sermons about how they were used to defend against and beat off all of the wild animals.

But more often than not, as the shepherd cares leads and cares for the flock, the rod and the staff are used to keep the flock together, to touch the sheep and let them know that the good shepherd is present.

God is always with us to give us strength, to give us courage. The divine presence is always bigger than, stronger than the circumstances surrounding us.

Evil is a smooth talker and strong seducer. It always promises what we want and makes it sound easy to obtain.

It never, however, reveals the compromises we must make and the high price we must pay to get what we want.

That is why we must choose carefully whose advice we seek and whose counsel we follow, doing our best to choose good shepherds whose hearts reflect the nature of God.

And if ever there was a good shepherd whose heart reflected the nature of God, it was Fred Rogers, Presbyterian minister, gentle neighbor to the world.

Mr. Rogers' neighborhood was where we knew we could and our children and grandchildren could walk without fear, finding comfort in his words and presence and gentle embrace.

Anthony Breznican tells of a time back in 1996 when he was a student at the University of Pittsburgh, in his words, "...struggling, lonely, dealing with a lot of broken pieces within myself...rudderless."

And if that's not tough enough, his grandfather had just died, the one person he could really talk to about this dark valley he was in.

He said he was walking out of the dorm one morning and heard the TV playing in an empty common room, the familiar music of his childhood: "Won't you be my neighbor..."

He watched the full show of this rerun, and says it was like a "cool hand on a hot head." left feeling ... better.

Then, several days later, he got in the elevator at the Student Union. The doors opened, and there in the elevator was Mr. Rogers.

They nodded at each other, rode down in silence, but when the doors opened and as they stepped into the lobby, Anthony turned to Mr. Rogers and stammered out, "Mr. Rogers, I don't want to bother you, but I just wanted to say thanks."

Mr. Rogers smiled at him and said: "Did you grow up as one of my television neighbors?"

Then Mr. Rogers said, "It's good to see you again neighbor" and opened his arms, inviting this young man, walking in a shadowy valley, in for a hug.

But the story doesn't end there.

They made small talk as they walked out of the building, but just before they got to the door Anthony told him how he had been helped when he really needed it by his recent viewing of the Mr. Rogers' episode.

And as Mr. Rogers opened the door to leave, Anthony blurted out, "So ... thanks for that. Again."

He says "Mr. Rogers nodded and let the door shut. Then he unbuttoned his coat and motioned to the window, where he sat down on the ledge."

Mr. Rogers asked him, "Do you want to tell me what was upsetting you?"

So he sat and told him his story: how his grandfather had just died, was one of the few good things he had, now he felt so alone, so helpless.

He says that Mr. Rogers began telling him about his grandfather, how he still missed him, still wished he was there when he needed him. "You'll never stop missing the people you love," Mr. Rogers told him.

They talked some more, and at the end, Anthony says he told him 'thank you' again, probably for "about the 13th time."

He apologized if he made Mr. Rogers late for wherever he was going, but Fred Rogers just smiled and said in his slow, gentle, neighborly voice, "Sometimes you're right where you need to be."

All I know is that when I have been in that dark valley and fear shadows every step of the way, it's not a matter of 'counting my favorite things' or counting our blessings.

What really matters is that we are seen and heard and deeply loved.

When we're in that valley between the fearful evil and the need for comfort, we look up and say, "You are with me."

But then we look down and around and see and feel God's promise and presence in who is next to us.

There are so many people who are hanging on by a thread, and maybe you are that thread where you are right where you need to be to bring light and love and comfort to any and all who walk in their darkest valley.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.