



## Praying Psalm 23:

### Following the Shepherd of our Souls

*Led by Bill Gaultiere*

*& the Spiritual Formation Ministries Team*

*Five Wednesdays, 7 to 9 pm, through October 7, 2009*

*Crystal Cathedral, Family Life Center 470*

### WEEK 4: Dark Valleys Can be Good

*"Even though I walk through the valley..." (Psalm 23:4)*

*September 30, 2009*

#### **REVIEW: "He restores my soul; He leads me..."**

Last week we learned that Good Shepherd restores our souls as we...

- Focus our love on his greatness ("The Lord is my Shepherd...")
- Slow down to rest with him in his green pastures and beside his still waters

This is also how the Shepherd of our souls guides us. To discern God's will in our decisions and to have his wisdom for how we live our lives we need to slow down and listen!

For people like us who want to live as apprentices to Jesus I don't think I could overemphasize the value of us setting aside time to be with Jesus in silence and solitude – in short pauses and extended periods of time for an hour or more.

One way that we've practiced slowing down, appreciating God's presence and listening for his wisdom is to do some centering prayer. We simply take a short, beloved phrase of Scripture into a quiet space (could be for just a few minutes, even just a breath prayer can re-orient us) and go deeper and deeper in our meditation and prayerful intention to live by those words.

#### **Breath Prayer**

"The Lord is my Shepherd... I shall not want"

Breathe the Word and Spirit in deep and slow: "The Lord is my Shepherd..."

Hold your breath, letting Word and Spirit surround and seep into your heart (your will)...

Exhale your worries and wants, *desiring only Jesus*: "I shall not want"

### **To Go or Not to Go to the Training?**

Even though I've been practicing discerning the leading of the Holy Spirit for many years – for most of the 41 years that I've been a Christ-follower and especially the last six-plus years since my spiritual renewal – I still struggle at times to slow myself down and listen to God.

Sometimes I lurch one way and then the opposite way. Sometimes I jump into things, maybe to please people or maybe out of my own ambition. Like Sunday two weeks ago...

I was tired and didn't feel ready for Monday! It had been a very busy week of work and ministry for me. It was all good and I enjoyed it. But I gave a lot of myself to a lot of people. I am introvert and needed some time "alone time" to re-energize.

On Sunday afternoon I had some alone time at home. I had a quiet space to re-gather myself and to enjoy not having an agenda or any expectations.

Then I got a call from Michelle Cavinder, "Bill are you coming to the Commissioned Pastor training at the church? Today is the first of six meetings. Rick Mysse and Sheila Coleman thought you were coming?"

"When does it start?"

"Five minutes ago."

"Oh. I didn't know. The soonest I could drive there would make me 30 minutes late. Let me think and pray on it."

*One minute* later I texted her back that I was on my way. So I got in my car and, as I did, the CD of Eugene Peterson teaching was on, and this is what he said as I was driving back to church: "Learning to say no frees you to be and do what God asks!"

I kid you not! He continued, "Sabbath is the most repeated command in the Bible. And it's the least practiced one, too. To practice the Sabbath does not mean to worship God – it means to stop working, to rest. This enables us to pay attention to what God is doing, give him thanks and praise, and join in with his Kingdom work. This is how we learn to do all that we do in Jesus' easy yoke."

I heard those words and then I made a U-turn and headed back home!

Then I thought, "But you already told your Michelle you'd be there. You don't want to disappoint her or Sheila or Rick – Michelle is your friend, Sheila is your boss, and Rick is your pope (denominational leader)! And this training in RCA theology is important for your ministry at the Crystal Cathedral."

So I made another U-turn and went to the meeting!

Well, it was a great meeting and I'm glad I went. And it helped me understand better the process and what was ahead.

But that evening and the next day I took the time I needed for discerning God's will for me. I prayed and talked at length with Kristi. I became as the weathervane in the breeze of the Spirit.

When I imagined myself completing the classes, readings, and exams, I felt confused about how I was going to make it work. I was distressed and overwhelmed about fitting it all into my schedule. My wife Kristi was concerned about me taking on another thing. I was feeling pressure to do this – not from Michelle, Sheila, or Rick. They had been only helpful. The rough pushing came from me – or perhaps from what Ignatius calls the “dark angel.”

When I thought about saying no, it made sense that this was not the season for me to do this training. I had too much going on – both in activity level and in increased responsibility. And I experienced a profound sense of God's peace.

I knew that God would have me to say no. So I set the boundary that I couldn't do the training now, but would re-look at it later.

As we lie down in green pastures and beside still waters with our Good Shepherd, he restores our souls and guides us in his paths of righteousness.

### **THE DARK VALLEY**

Dark Valleys in our life – any unfavorable experience – can be good. Good Shepherd uses them to test us, to show us what our character is like and where we're at in our relationship with him. God uses our difficulties to teach us and train us to become more like Jesus. And that's what's most important of all!

In our Psalm 23 journey with Good Shepherd, we encounter challenges that, depending upon how we respond to them, can help to form our character in Christ and expand God's Kingdom... The valley of the shadow of death, Good Shepherd's rod and his staff, and being at the table with enemies.

**“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me”** (Psalm 23:4).

We're in a new season of the soul in our Psalm 23 journey: the hot summer of the desert: a time to grow through struggles and trials.

The shadows are long in the valley. The sun rises late and sets early. And in the shadows lurk the enemies of the sheep: bears, coyotes, snakes.

We don't want to go through the valley of the shadow of death – but it's the way to reach the cooler weather and greener pastures of the mountain plateau set like a table, the high country.

**“Your rod and your staff, they comfort me”** (Psalm 23:4).

Good Shepherd's rod and staff are ways that he disciplines us, ways that he teaches us good boundaries and trains us to help us to learn and to grow.

The shepherd's rod is like a club. He uses it to ward off enemies or to give a sheep a love spank to get its attention and say, “No! Don't go into those thorny bushes to eat those berries!”

The rod symbolizes God's Word. Jesus uses the rod of Scripture in our lives like a gardener pruning a grapevine to make it more fruitful. One of the ways the Word of God blesses us is to show us what we need to cut out of our lives, what we need to change to become people that are more loving.

The shepherd's staff is his long cane with a hook on the end. He uses it to reach out and touch a sheep, tapping it to keep it on the path. At night he stretches out his staff at the opening to the sheepfold and, one-by-one, each sheep passes under his staff so the shepherd can inspect it – identifying wool that needs cleaning and wounds that need healing.

The staff symbolized the ministry of the Holy Spirit speaking to us, reminding us of Jesus' words, interceding for us from deep within us.

**"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies"** (Psalm 23:5).

In the desert, it gets really hot in summer time. So our wise Shepherd leads us up to the mountain plateau. This is where the valley leads to: higher places with God. He's training us to have hinds' feet that climb into high places with the Lord! (Psalm 18:33).

In high country, it's cool and beautiful and the grass is green. And Good Shepherd prepares a table before us: green pastures that he weeds, watering holes that he clears of brush, enemies that he keeps at bay.

The tablelands represent learning to forgive those who sin against us and to bless those that curse us. Good Shepherd wants to teach us to be at peace in his care even when people criticize us, gossip about us, undermine our efforts, or mistreat us in some other way.

**Let's come back to four little words in this section: "You are with me"** (Psalm 23:4).

Did you notice this important shift? David starts off Psalm 23 speaking of God as "he." It seems that David is talking to himself and to us about what God is like. But then, abruptly, he shifts to speaking personally to his Lord and Shepherd: "You are with me."

Right here, as we enter the dark valley, facing hardships and being disciplined, in this season of difficulty and training – just when we're tempted to feel abandoned by God because he doesn't seem to be blessing us or answering our prayers – now David speaks warmly to his Good Shepherd. And the rest of the Psalm continues with this intimate conversation with the Shepherd of our souls.

This is the key that opens the door to David's words in Psalm 23: **"I will fear no evil."** By the way, overcoming fear by relying on Jesus will be the theme of our next five-week "Come and Grow" series at the Crystal Cathedral! It's called "Fear Not."

Jesus said to us, "Fear not, little flock of sheep, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Luke 11:28). Learning to live in the kingdom of the heavens here and now is how we learn to "fear not." This is what we'll be learning and practicing together.

In summary, the valley of the shadow of death, our Shepherd's rod and staff, and being at the table with our enemies are all examples of difficulties or tests that teach us to take up our cross and follow Jesus. Sometimes life hurts or disappoints us, and this can be a good thing for us because we are reminded that Jesus is enough for us! Even if things are going wrong in our life, we can learn to live with overflowing love, joy, and peace because Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is with us – caring for us and discipling us.

**PRAYER PRACTICE / WEEKLY EXPERIMENT: Soul Talk or Journaling**

Jesus promised us, "When two or three are gathered in my name I am there" (Matthew 18:20). He taught us that, when we comfort or encourage one another, he is expressing his love in this interchange, living in the giver and the receiver. This is why the great disciple Paul calls a group of Christ-followers "the Body of Christ" and says that you and I are to be "Christ's Ambassadors" to others (2 Corinthians 5:20).

For our prayer experiment this week, I encourage you to follow up and what we did in class: share with a friend about a "dark valley" you're in or have been in and offer to listen to him or her do the same.

What dark valley are you going through? What is a dark valley from your past?

Releasing to a listening friend something that we feel guilty, angry, or scared about or some other personal difficulty sets us free so we can better follow Christ as his apprentices. Describing to a "Christ's Ambassador" a dark valley that we're in is healing for our souls and reminds us that truly we are not alone, Christ is with us. Sharing something that we learned in a time of struggle encourages us and others.

Another way to verbalize a dark valley experience is to write about it on paper: journal or write your own psalm to God. Putting our experiences in words helps us to process thoughts and feelings, unburden ourselves, relate with ourselves, and connect tangibly with our Heavenly Father's compassion.