

2nd Sunday After Lent, March 12, 2006, Liturgical Year "B"

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

"Overcoming the Sting of Death" part 2

DEATH'S PURPOSE

Recall from last week how we looked at death's purpose, how we answered the question, why is death part of human existence? We saw how the Bible teaches four main reasons for death: 1) it confronts us with the problem of sin, 2) it holds us accountable, 3) it reminds us of our absolute need for God – that we are nothing without Him, and 4) it points us to the only One who has conquered death and can give us eternal life: our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

PSALM 23

Now it is one thing to know why we die, but how do we, personally, overcome the sting of death? We find the answer to overcoming the sting of death in **Psalm 23**. Written by King David from his experience as a shepherd, Psalm 23 is a wonderful, beautiful psalm, probably the most popular psalm in our world. It's a psalm that is often read at funerals, and rightfully so. Please turn now in your prayer books to Psalm 23.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Now I want to bring your attention to verse 4. In this verse, David, spoke of a valley called, "***the valley of the shadow of death.***" I am told there is such a valley in the land of Israel. If you were to go there today you could find it. Shepherds often had to first take their sheep through such valleys before the sheep could find pasture in the lowlands of Jericho or in the highlands of the Judean hills. Many of these valleys were high and dangerous places. There were caves there, shadowy places, and in Bible times there were bears and hyenas, and leopards. But not only were there wild animals, robbers would also hide there, and there were steep places where sheep might fall. And even at high noon there would be shadows. It was a frightening place to be. This is what David had in mind when he wrote of the "Valley of the shadow of death."

And so David is saying that the Lord is to me what I've been to my sheep. "***The Lord is my Shepherd...and even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me...***" David had learned to overcome the sting of death.

DEATH'S REALITY

Now if we are going to overcome the sting of death, not only do we need to recognize its purpose, we need to accept death's reality. Death is a decided fact. Notice, how verse 4 begins. "***Even though, I walk through the valley.***" The old English has "Yea, though I walk..." In other words, there is no choice but to walk through it.

Death is a subject many people don't want to talk about it. But it is a certainty, nonetheless. **Hebrews 9:27** ***It is appointed that a man die once.*** That's an appointment we all have. You can't avoid it. The only exception is if Jesus comes first. But if Jesus doesn't

come first, we most certainly will die. Have you heard the recent statistic out on death? One out of one people die.

Now it may be a decided fact, but it's timing is uncertain. In other words, none of us knows when we're going to die. That's why David wrote in **1 Sam. 20:3**: ***"There is but a step between me and death."*** As a shepherd, he knew that one false move and his sheep could tumble over the precipice. The old may die, but sometimes someone in their youth dies or a little child has to grapple with the cords of death. We don't know when death will come to us. That's why **James 4:13-14** says: ***"Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money. Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."***

You see God doesn't have to take our life, all He has to do is stop giving it. It's of the Lords' mercy that we do not die. Life is a gift from God. As James says, our attitude should be, ***"If the Lord wills, we should do this or that..."*** Our life is like a breath on a frosty morning. Here for a moment and then gone.

And I'll tell you what is also true about death, it is a personal fact. David writes, ***"Even though I walk..."*** He doesn't say, "Even though they walk, but I walk." You are walking in the valley of the shadow of death. I am walking in the shadow of death. Death comes to each of us personally.

So if we are going to overcome the sting of death we not only need to understand its purpose, we need to come face to face with its reality. We need to look death straight in the face. We need to think about it and bring it into focus. And say with David, ***"Yes, even though..."*** Yes, it's there, and I am going to face it head on.

But not only do we need to face death's reality we need to understand death's defeat. Death is not only a decided fact, it is a defeated foe.

THERE CAN BE NO VALLEY WITHOUT MOUNTAINS

There are three wonderful truths when we think of death as a defeated foe. First, David likens death to a valley. ***"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..."*** Now if there is one thing that is always true concerning a valley, it's this: **There can be no valley without mountains.** Isn't that true? It is impossible for there to be a valley unless there are mountains. Psalm 23 is the valley psalm between two mountain psalms. **Psalm 22** is a mountain psalm. It deals with Mt. Calvary, it tells of the crucifixion of the Messiah. And then **Ps. 24** is a mountain psalm - it deals with the Coronation of the Messiah, it deals with the second coming of our Lord. So **Psalm 23** is a valley between two mountains. Over here are the blood drenched slopes Of Mount Calvary, and over here are the sunlit peaks of Mount Zion. Over here we have crucifixion and over here we have coronation. And we are living in the valley.

Now who is it who brings the sheep through the valley? The shepherd. Now let me ask you another question: Who is called the Shepherd in the New Testament? Jesus. In fact Jesus is described as shepherd three times in New Testament.

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First, the Lord Jesus is called **the Good Shepherd**. Jesus said in **Jn. 10:10**: ***"I am the Good Shepherd who lays His life down for the sheep."*** Now the Good Shepherd dying for the sheep, that's Mount Calvary. But then the Lord Jesus is called **the Chief Shepherd** – **1 Peter 5:4**: ***"And when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that shall never fade away."*** The Chief Shepherd coming for the sheep – that's Mount Zion.

But then also the Lord Jesus is called **the Great Shepherd** and that's the One who now lives for us. **Hebrews 13:20-21**: ***"Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord, Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep."*** You see He's the one who rose from the dead, He's the one who has conquered the valley of the shadow of death, He is the One living with us and leading us through the valley.

The Good Shepherd - He died for me. The Chief Shepherd – He is coming for me. The Great Shepherd - He lives for me in the valley of the shadow of death. Are you are down in the valley? Then look to the mountains. Look to Mt. Calvary and look to Mt. Zion. Look to the Great Shepherd of the sheep. There can be no valley without mountains.

THERE CAN BE NO SHADOW WITHOUT A LIGHT

Second, there can be no shadow without a light. Notice what David says, ***"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."*** He doesn't call it the "valley of death," but the "valley of the shadow of death."

There was a pastor whose wife died when she was still a young woman, leaving behind, their little daughter. The little girl didn't understand all the intricacies about life and death and Jesus dying for our sins. Sometime after the funeral, the father took her downtown to do some shopping. When they were in car, the little girl looked over and on the wall of the department store, she noticed the shadow of a truck. The shadow was even larger than the truck because the sun was setting low in the west and it made a huge shadow on the store's wall. The little girl said, "Daddy look at the big shadow of the truck." And he thought right then I am going to teach her a lesson. And he said, "Sweetheart, if you had your choice, would you rather be hit by the shadow of the truck or would you rather be hit by the truck?" She said, "Daddy, that's easy, I would much rather be hit by the shadow of the truck than to be hit by the truck." He said, "That's right, darling, it's only the shadow that hit mommy, the truck hit Jesus 2000 years ago at Calvary."

The truck hit Jesus. What a wonderful lesson. You see Jesus is the death of death. He pulled the sting out of death. He took the gloom out of the grave. He took the dread out of dying. And Jesus has given us a hope that is steadfast and sure. A shadow may frighten you but a shadow cannot hurt you. And death is just a shadow if you know the Lord Jesus Christ.

There can be no shadow unless there's a light. Are you in the valley of the shadow of death right now? Look to the Light. And I will tell if you look to the light, the shadow will fall behind you. You won't even see it.

THERE CAN BE NO EVIL WITHOUT A GREATER GOOD

Not only can there be no valley without mountains and no shadow without a light, there's something else I want you to see in Psalm 23: **There can be no evil without a greater good. *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with Me."***

Now who is the Thou? Who is David talking to? Well, do remember how this psalm begins? "The Lord is My Shepherd." David is talking to the Lord. In many English versions, "LORD" is in all caps. It is our translation of the most sacred name for God, "Yahweh," In fact this name was so sacred to the Jews that they would only write it down with its four consonants – YHWH – hence our "LORD." It was considered unpronounceable by the Jews. That name was so sacred that a Jewish scribe copying that name would first take a bath and get a new pen before he would write it down.

The name came from the time when Moses was getting ready to lead the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. When God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, He told him to tell the people that "I AM," sent him. God is "I AM." And so from the verb, "to be," comes the name, Yahweh. But *Yahweh* is not mentioned in the New Testament, only in the Old. Why? **Because Jesus is our Yahweh.** In fact, do you know that the name, "Jesus" means "Yahweh Saves." So if David can say "I shall fear no evil because Yahweh is with me," how much more can we say the same, knowing that Jesus – Yahweh in the flesh - is with us? David is comparing the evil with the Great Shepherd. And there is no comparison.

There can be no valley without mountains. There can be no shadow without a light. And there can be no evil without a greater good. Truth is mightier than error. Grace is greater than sin. Our sovereign God is greater than Satan. And life is greater than death. We've got to understand that. ***"Yea thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou, O Lord, art with Me."***

Do you want to overcome the sting of death? Than realize its purpose, recognize its reality, and recall its defeat. Next time we will continue to see what exactly Jesus does for us now that He has defeated death. Let us pray...