

**SERMON**  
**“Walking through the Valley of Shadows”**  
**Isaiah 53:5-12**  
**Sunday, August 14, 2022**

A man was just coming out of anesthesia after surgery and his wife was sitting at his bedside. His eyes fluttered open, and he murmured, “You’re beautiful.”

Flattered, the wife continued her vigil while he drifted back to sleep.

Later, her husband woke up once again and said, “You’re cute.”

Startled, his wife asked him, “What happened to beautiful?”

“The drugs are wearing off,” he replied.

I don’t know about you, but when I am passing through the valley of shadows; that would be my least favorite time for the drugs to be wearing off. Maybe this is why the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm holds such a special place in our hearts; for it invites us to focus on a changeless God amid the many changes of life. God, as our Shepherd enables us to manage the valleys of shadows without the aid of drugs.

Listen, once again to the words of the prophet Isaiah as he assures us just what the work of our Good Shepherd is: *“He was wounded and crushed because of our sins; by taking our punishment, he made us completely well.”*

Nobel Prize-winning American physicist Frank Wilczek in an interview for an online German news website talked about the changeless beauty of the universe’s extraordinary symmetry by comparing it to a circle with a triangle in the center of it. Pointing to the circle he said; *“It is symmetrical because you can rotate it around its center and it will still remain a circle.”* Then pointing to the triangle, he said; *“any small amount of rotation will change its position; its corners pointing in different directions. But if you were to rotate it by 360 degrees it comes back to itself.”*

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, like that circle, is also symmetrical for it speaks of a shepherd who; no matter how we move, remains the shepherd. He is the same from any angle. He is the shepherd who *“makes me lie down in green pastures ... leads me beside still waters ... restores my soul ... leads me in right paths ... walks with me through the darkest valley ... prepares a table before me ... and anoints my head with oil.”*

Like that triangle, always pointing in a different direction in its 360-degree rotation, the circle keeps bringing us back to the truth the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: God will always be the same.

No matter how dark our valleys of shadows may become promises the 4<sup>th</sup> verse of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm *“we will have no need to fear evil; for the Lord our God is with us; His rod and staff -- they comfort us.”* This verse, I believe is the structural and theological center of the psalm, maybe even of all the scriptures, for it reminds us that even in the most life-threatening situations, God’s provision will be sufficient. This verse describes the character of the shepherd who is at the center of the circle and everything else revolves around it.

A patient received a prescription by her doctor after a full medical examination. It read: “Take the green pill with a glass of water when you get up. Take the blue pill with a glass of water after lunch. Then just before going to bed, take the red pill with another glass of water.”

After verbalizing what he had written on the prescription the doctor asked his patient if she had any questions.

“Yes,” said the patient, “Exactly what is my problem, Doctor?”

To which the doctor responded, “You’re not drinking enough water.”

Like the doctor who wrote the prescription for water we have a shepherd who also provides us with a prescription for a life that is centered on the only thing in life that never changes...

...that is always constant...

...and is of perfect symmetry...

...who is change without change.

Through all of the difficult and disturbing changes of life, we are cared for by a changeless God:

- Stumbling through dark valleys? We are pursued by goodness and mercy.
- Worrying about daily needs? God sets a table of food before us and pours an overflowing cup.
- Unsure about the future? Fearful of the threats to your physical, emotional and spiritual well-being? We have a God at the center of our lives who gives us the assurance that *"Goodness and mercy are following us all the days of our lives, and that we shall dwell in the house of the Lord our whole life long."*

While staying at the Von Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, Vermont this past July Lori and I had an opportunity to meet Marie von Trapp's youngest grandson. For those of you who may not recall; Julie Andrews made Marie von Trapp's story come alive in the classic movie *The Sound of Music*. He told us the following story of what his grandmother said about the land they settled on; there in the Green Mountains of Vermont when the first came to America. As they arrived on the mountain my grandparents, said the young von Trapp, scouted over the land. My grandfather, a baron in Germany and captain of a German submarine, stood staring at the condition of the property. Spread out before him was what remained of a barn and a house that was nothing more than a pile of sticks. Dismayed by the sight he called out to Marie, *"I think we have made the wrong decision by purchasing this piece of land; just look at the condition of this barn and it's farmhouse."*

Marie, on the other hand, had her back to the barn and the home, and was instead staring at the valleys and mountains that were spread out before her on the side of that mountain. Hearing the baron complaining about the condition of the barn and its farmhouse she said to him: *"If you turned around and see what I see you wouldn't be concerned with the condition of the barn; you would be praising God for the beauty of his creation. We are home;"* she said, *"We are home."*

Like that mountainside in Vermont, the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm is our reminder that not only is the Lord our shepherd but that we are home in him. Even though we will walk through the valleys of shadows in this life; those valleys do not define us; the shepherd does!