

Facing Loss
Psalm 23
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I was meeting with a member of the church this week, and as our conversation was wrapping up, I said, "I need to go work on my sermon for Sunday." She said to me, "well, what are we afraid of this week?" I said, "loss." She said, "yes we are."

This is the last week in our series, "Fear Not: What the Bible Says to our Fears." Throughout this series, Abby and I have landed on some recurring themes and at the center has been trust.

During Fear of the Unknown week, as Abby was preaching on Jesus walking on water and Peter's failure when he gave it a try, she said, "The heart of swimming is that you can float. We have to discover that the water will hold us. But we can only figure that out if we stop flailing, stop thrashing, stop relying on only our own power. Likewise, the heart of having faith is that you can trust in God to hold you. But we can only figure that out if we stop relying only on our own power. We must take what feels like a terrible risk, and let go, and let the Holy do its work. Instead of sinking or swimming (with God), how about floating instead?"

I returned to Fear of the Unknown week because when we are facing loss our fear of the unknown and our fear of sadness (of the pain itself) often come together in a potent combination.

I don't think we always realize how often in life we are dealing with loss and grief. We know, of course, that as we are facing our own mortality or living in the wake of the death of someone we dearly love, we are dealing with loss. We know that facing loss like this is hard and it takes time to heal. But there are other smaller losses we face too in various transitions in life: when children leave home, when they get married, when we change jobs or retire, when we move to a different town, or from a house to an apartment or assisted living. When relationships change and end. There are moments when we realize we have lost some part of the life we hoped for, or we are simply losing a part of life that we've known, that we are familiar with and we don't know yet what the new will be.

I also don't think we realize how often in life we automatically avoid facing the loss we are going through. We naturally try to avoid pain. Makes sense in most situations except when we are dealing with our emotions because unless we face our loss we will not heal.

When I was in seminary, I developed a very close friendship. We were besties, bffs. Sara and I and my friend and his wife hung out a lot together as couples. As graduation approached, I was preparing to start serving a church in the midwest and he was going to a Ph.D. program in Atlanta. I started hatching elaborate and ridiculous plans that would allow us to stay in the same place. My friend listened kindly and then told me repeatedly, "Todd, these are bad ideas." Before graduation our Pastoral Care professor preached a sermon in chapel and she wanted to attend to our feelings. She named the excitement of moving on to new opportunities, and the sadness of saying goodbye to good friends. I turned into a puddle. She invited me past the avoidance. The elaborate plans were because of my fear. I was afraid to let go of this stage of life that I knew, and I knew this friendship wouldn't be the same. I was afraid of turning towards the unknown. I was afraid of feeling the sadness that would come with saying goodbye, and the sadness that would come with missing this friendship.

Today, Psalm 23 invites us to trust, as we anticipate loss, as we go through it. We are invited to trust that God is with us, and that we can let go and let the Holy carry us a little. The structural and theological center of Psalm 23 is verse 4. "Even when I walk through the darkest valley, (or the valley of the shadow of death), I fear no evil. For you are with me." The Hebrew word that is translated darkest valley, "tsalmaveth" is an expansive word that combines English meanings for death and shadow. It names death and then seems to be trying to name experiences in life where start feeling some of the same fear and sadness. *Tsalmaveth seems to function like our word loss.* I think we could fairly substitute this for verse 4, *even when I'm losing something or someone important to me*, I will not fear. For you are with me...

The writer doesn't fear because God is the good shepherd. God provides food and drink, the basics of what is needed to get from one day to the next. It is in God's very nature to show loving kindness, this writer says. That goodness and mercy of God will follow us all the days of our lives. The Hebrew here may be better translated *God's goodness and mercy will pursue us*

all the days of our lives. Even though we face loss the affirmation of this writer is that God will be chasing us with goodness. Not making the valley go away, but to help us get through.

So we are invited to let go of our fear of the darkest valley, of the shadow times, to place more and more trust in this loving kindness of God that will always be chasing us around, giving us what we need to get from one day to the next.

Whenever I hear and think about Psalm 23, I think about A farmer I'll call Evan. Evan was a member of the first congregation I served in Dodgeville, WI, a very kind and gentle man, a lifelong dairy farmer. When I got to know him, he was in late seventies or early 80s. At the end of my first pastoral visit with him, one of my first pastoral visits in my pastoral career, I asked Evan if he would like to pray. "I've always liked the 23rd Psalm," he said. Not knowing yet what he meant by saying this, I said, "I like the 23rd Psalm too." Then he said, "did you know that the last pastor didn't even have the 23rd Psalm memorized? Can you believe that?" I thought, "uh oh." I hadn't reviewed Psalm 23 in a while, and I certainly wasn't going to remember it right then. Afraid, and not knowing what to do, I prayed a long and earnest prayer hoping it would be just as meaningful as Psalm 23, and that maybe he would forget he had hinted at praying Psalm 23. It didn't. When I said Amen and opened my eyes, the look in his eyes told me that he was on to me.

I know that Evan grew up memorizing certain Bible passages with Psalm 23 being one of the most important passages to memorize. I've wondered since whether Psalm 23 was important to Evan not only because it was a Psalm a good Christian should memorize, but I wondered if this Psalm was **the** anchor that helped him through the losses he had lived through. Maybe this Psalm was part of the goodness and mercy that pursued him to the other side of the valley.

Evan had been a dairy farmer all his life, but a few years before I started serving the church, doctors found a tumor in his lower back. In Evan's case, removing the tumor and saving his life would paralyze him from the waist down. When I knew Evan, he was in a wheelchair. He had lost his legs. He had lost his ability to help with the work on the farm that he had always done and enjoyed. He had lost the way life was.

While we were visiting, before the Psalm 23 debacle, Evan was talking about life in a wheelchair, and he started to cry and said, "I'm so grateful." And he started talking about all that his wife and children and doctors and neighbors and friends had given him. There was sadness in his tears, but it is also like he was crying tears of relief, that while he had been going through the darkest valley, he discovered that there was some goodness and mercy there waiting for him too.

I wonder if part of the reason Evan wanted to pray Psalm 23 with me is that he had discovered how true it was in the these last years of his life. I didn't know him as he was edge of the valley of the shadow, or in the depths of it. But I did get to meet him as the shadow was lifting. He was grateful, for God had provided what he needed and was still doing so. I think this Psalm was not just a Psalm of comfort for Evan, a Psalm that invited him to keep placing his trust in God, I think Psalm 23 had become a Psalm of praise.

May we trust that we can even face our loss. Even when sadness and the unknown meet, we will not be alone. God's goodness and mercy will be there too. Amen.