

Peace in the Storm

Years ago, a major art gallery sponsored a competition for artists. They were offering prizes for the best painting on the subject of "Peace." As attendees browsed through the entries, most had decided that one certain painting was almost sure to win.

It portrayed this lush green pasture under a vivid blue sky, with the cows grazing lazily and a little boy walking through the grass with his fishing pole over his shoulder. It really made you feel peaceful.

But it came in second.

The painting that won was a real surprise!

The scene was the ocean in a violent storm. The sky was ominous, the lightning was cutting across the sky, and the waves were crashing into the rock walls of the cliffs by the shore.

No apparent peace.

But you had to look twice to understand what was going on. There, about halfway up the cliff, was a birds' nest, tucked into a tiny hollow in the rock. A mother bird was sitting on that nest - with her little babies, tucked underneath her, sleeping soundly. That was perfect peace!

Now that was the title of the prize-winning painting - and rightly so. Because peace is not just the absence of a storm - it is peace in the middle of the storm. The kind of peace many of us could use right now - the kind of peace that you can have right now. If you're resting where you ought to be.

Our headlines have become dominated with war - as so many hearts in Israel and Palestine and in Ukraine and Russia and many other countries around the world have been struggling with new anxieties, new fears - we're blessed to have as our leader the great peacemaker, our Lord Jesus Christ, and for the incredible peace offered to us all in Psalm 23 - for he is the Shepherd of the psalm.

Psalm 23, is a message that can be called "Good News for Troubled Times" or "Peace in the Midst of the Storm." It's our word for today from the Word of God. Maybe it should be our word for every day right now! "The Lord is my shepherd I have no need for anything else."

So, the more troubled things are, the more present the shepherd becomes. Our God is not a God who walks with us just in sunny days but the God of the Bible is there for us in the storm.

The world as it stands at the moment is in a perilous condition. The scenes of horror that daily fill our homes through the news are unbelievable. The way that humans treat each other goes beyond explanation. But this has always been the case, since the beginning there has been enmity, there has been jealousy, greed and lust for power.

Psalms 23 is one of the best loved psalms, written by David. David was a man who endured many challenges in his life; he emerges onto the pages of the Bible fighting Goliath which epitomises his whole life. He faced up to all his challenges with the same courage and faith as he did slaying Goliath, and he went into battles always trusting that God was with him.

He faced external battles, like fighting Goliath and armies; he faced emotional battles like losing his son; he faced the jealousy of King Saul and was hunted like an animal; he faced the battle of his own weakness of lust with Bathsheba; he faced the battle of guilt by being instrumental in the death of an innocent man. All through life David was a man who was fighting, who was running, who was seeking, who was hiding.

When this little gem of a psalm was written we don't know, but it could easily be later in his life, as he looks back on life, and he sums up his life. And what does he see? He sees the hand of God with him at every stage.

This is a psalm for us also; we will not fight the battles that David fought, yet we will fight our own battles, and each stage of life brings with it its own challenges – from birth to death life is challenging, but the secret is how to cope in the midst of the storm, or as the Apostle Paul wrote, "I am content in every situation."

Let us see how David coped.

Firstly, and most importantly, he knew the presence of God in his life.

When he penned this psalm, it was like an artist painting a picture, he painted a shepherd in every area of his life.

If anyone knew about a shepherd's life, it was David, as he looked after his flock in the fields of Palestine as a boy. The shepherd was a metaphor that was part of Israel's history; they were like a flock of sheep, and they came under the guidance and control of the shepherd.

But for David, he saw this metaphor not just for Israel, but it was personal, for he didn't just know *of* the shepherd, but David *knew* the shepherd, and he could say, "the Lord is MY shepherd".

This is where the psalm begins, with this confidence and certainty, that God is our Shepherd. It is a metaphor that our Lord Jesus engaged with, when he said, "I am the Good Shepherd, I know my sheep and they know me."

I was once asked by the daughter of a dying lady, "What does my mother need to do to have peace in her life before she dies?" I said, "All she needs to do is trust that God loves her, and that Jesus is her shepherd and that he has died for her and taken her sin on himself, and that he has opened Heaven for her." Her mum smiled, and said, thank you. Her mum passed away soon after, with peace in her heart.

Our faith begins in the knowledge that the love of the shepherd is with us. He is gracious and kind; he is forgiving and loving; he understands us and he walks with us, he goes in front and he calls us to follow.

Then he says, because he is my shepherd, I lack for nothing.

It's not complicated being a Christian, it's all about a relationship. It's all about knowing the shepherd, and when we do, then we can say from the bottom of our hearts, I lack nothing.

There is nothing else in this life as important as knowing God as your shepherd.

Life will let you down; friends may betray you; partners may leave you; gold may turn to dust; homes may perish, but one thing that will last for all eternity, is that God is your shepherd.

Then he goes on to describe why he is our shepherd and what the shepherd does for us.

Firstly, he says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures." God knows when you need a rest. Rest is important in our lives. Rest is essential. In our busy world, we fight against taking rest. So we learn from this psalm that God makes us lie down beside green pastures.

There is something about the colour green that is good for us. It is calming for our minds, offering relaxation with its gentle and peaceful undertones.

When I went to selection school for the ministry over 30 years ago. One of the panel, who was interviewing me at selection school, picked up on my busy work ethic; at that time I was busy with a business, busy with a family; busy with ministry and the list went on, and she told me a story about her husband, who was a Church of Scotland minister, and how busy he was

being busy... doing everything – but one day, he fell and broke his leg, and that taught him a valuable lesson, that he was not indispensable, and they saw it as God's way of making him slow down, taking rest in green pastures.

There are times that God wants us to lie down in green pastures; to stop fretting, to stop worrying, to stop trying to impress, and just enjoy his presence through the green pastures. I know that it goes against our Presbyterian work ethic, but these times are essential for our growth and our strength to be rekindled.

When David looked back on all his struggles, he must have treasured those moments when there were green pastures and still waters. He writes, *he refreshes my soul*. When were you last spiritually refreshed?

When did you last know God making you lie down, leading you beside still waters, guiding you in the paths of righteousness?

Of course we would like to stay in those places of rest forever, and one day we will through Jesus, but whilst we are on Earth, there will be challenges and more battles to fight, and storms to face. God leads us onwards and even into the valley of darkness. He led Jesus into the wilderness and led him to the cross. David knows all about these dark valleys; that's life, and so do we all also, for we have been there often; haven't we?

We may be forced into a dark valley; death of a loved one, illness, sadness and suddenly we are walking through the darkest valley; the days of green pastures and still waters seem so far away, and all we see are frightening and threatening shadows.

The psalmist writes in Psalm 40, "Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging." Everything's collapsing - things that have always been there for us. But no fear. Why? "God is our refuge and strength. He is in the valley with us, in the midst of our storm, holding us and sticking closer than a friend.

In the midst of what is going on in our world today, let us continue to pray for these situations; pray for peace, real peace, that those poor suffering people in Palestine, Israel, Ukraine, will come through this dark valley and find green pastures and still waters again. But pray that in the midst of the valley, they will find the peace of God.

Sometimes, we need to turn off the news, leave those other voices, and get where you can just be with God. And realise that as long as you're in His

hands, there's no such thing as out of control. He is still God and you are still His!

And if you have never given yourself to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the God who died for you, there's never been a better time than this. With so much changing, with so much uncertainty, who knows when our Lord will return, but these days seem close, it is great to know you are safe in a relationship with Him. If you've never begun that relationship, tell Him you want to today. And, if you need someone to speak to about it, come and share with me, that's why I'm here, to help us all move into a deeper relationship with the Good Shepherd.

When you are nesting in the care of the Lord Jesus Christ, just like the little chicks in that painting, you can rest through any storm. You belong to the One who can give you peace in the midst of the storm. To the one who calms the storms.

Let me finish with few thoughts from our reading in Philippians; the Apostle Paul in prison for his faith; he faced many storms in life but he learned how to cope, and how to navigate the storms and his advice was in the midst of the storm; to rejoice in the Lord...why? Because the Lord is near; To live gentle lives, in other words to walk humbly and trusting in the Lord and take every situation to God in prayer, why? Because he is near and he will help you and the result, said Paul, of doing these things is this, "The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ."

And he says, think about these things,

"Whatever is true, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, whatever is excellent or praiseworthy, think about these things....and the God of peace be with you".

Amen.