John 10:22-30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.’

As we continue to experience The Word of the Lord together, let us pray. Almighty God, speak to us anew of your love in Jesus Christ, that we too might live in love every day and show that love to the entire world. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, thou who art our rock and our redeemer, Amen.

PSALM 23 (KJV)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

This is the Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God.

Tradition tells us that the Valley of the Shadow of Death is a real place in Israel.

It is a valley, or a mountain pass, that got its name from shepherds because of its steep sides and sheer rock walls. It was a terrifying place for skittish, defenseless, fearful sheep, for in the cliffs on both sides of the valley there were numerous caves and crevices that were perfect hiding places for animals of prey - and for people who meant harm to passing travelers. Sounds would echo and amplify in the valley, distressing the flock.

We look at the Psalm and hear: The Lord is my shepherd.... He makes me lie down in green pastures.... He leads me by still waters.... He leads me in paths of righteousness.

But now the sheep are in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.
Reality tells us that the valley of the shadow of death is a real place.

My friend wrote a prayer about this reality and posted it on RevGalBlogPals on Friday. It goes like this:

God-
I'm too grouchy and grief-stricken to begin with a longer list of titles and acclamations. You know who You are and what You do.
I have a small bone to pick about “a time and season for everything”.
Surely, a young mother dying is out of season.
Certainly, a late release of cell phone footage from a slain woman is not at the right time.
Can we agree that there is not actually a season for countries to plot against one another and to ignore the plight of citizens and those seeking safety?
Was there ever supposed to be a season for children to ponder their own deaths- at school?
I cannot believe any of these things were meant to have their own times and places.
In fact, I reject that notion.
Where is Your response? Where is the grace upon grace?
We cannot wait generations, as from Sodom’s inhospitality to Naomi’s press upon Ruth the Moabite.
If there is a season now, let it be the season of Your clear and tangible signs of healing and power. We need this season now.

May it be so!

This prayer struck a chord with me, and I don’t think I’m the only one. Whether it’s private or public – the Valley of the Shadow of Death is real.

It is those terrifying, dark, lonely, frightening times in life. It is those times of sickness, tragedy, emotional stress, tension, economic disaster, loneliness, grief - when God feels far away. Sounds echo and amplify in our valley, distressing the flock – and we wonder if our prayers and exclamations are being heard by the Shepherd… or if they are just one more bleeting sound added to the millions of cries already in the night.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

We’re used to hearing these words at funerals and gravesides. This is the case so much so that just like the hymn, Amazing Grace, worship leaders hesitate to use it on Sunday mornings because it brings folks to memories of saying good-bye to loved ones.

I think we need to retrieve this Psalm from the land of funerals and sentimentality. There is a good word here about a God who shepherds us – a God who makes no promises that we will
not experience the valley, and yet every promise that God will walk with us in it. There is no need to fear. This is an active and living word for right here and right now, not just an assurance for how God will shepherd us after we are gone from this earthly kingdom.

But I dare say... that some of us, don’t like to admit that we need a Shepherd. We turn our backs and walk away.

The text from the Gospel of John this morning contains a drop-the-mic moment from Jesus. He is surrounded by religious authorities who are trying to trap him so that they can get rid of him, and Jesus basically obliges.

If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.’

The Father and I are one. Any questions?

Truth be told, if I were going to hang out with a Jesus from one of the Gospels, it wouldn’t be John’s Jesus. He’s too... in your face. Out of all the Gospels, I like the Gospel of Mark the most. It doesn’t make me feel inadequate and complicit in the oppression of humanity like the Gospel of Luke. (Truly, when y’all get most upset about a sermon I preach being too political, 9 times out of 10 the Scripture is from Luke.) The Gospel of Matthew often makes me feel like I am on the cusp of being thrown into a pit of fire filled with gnashing teeth.

I like the Gospel of Mark because Jesus is so accessible, I like the low Christology. I like the son of Joseph not knowing he was JESUS until he’s baptized. I like the humanity he shows. Even in the powerful miracle stories, like the healing of the hemorrhaging woman, I tend to focus on him stopping in the middle of the crowd because he felt someone touch him, rather than on the power of the healing itself.

Jesus is easier to understand that way. Jesus feels closer that way. Jesus is safer that way. Jesus is our friend.

But there’s a danger in that.

Our friends can’t save the world. Our friends are not one with God. Our friends can support us and sustain us as we get through the valley of the shadow of death... but they cannot save us.

That’s right my beloved, science-believing, buttoned-down Protestant Christians who do all you
You heard me. I believe that Jesus has the power to save humanity, and in fact, already has. Jesus saves!

"Last year there were two goats who had a bit of a GPS mishap that landed them on the beam of a bridge on the rural, western end of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The Turnpike Commission had to borrow manpower and equipment from PENNDOT in order to rescue the two explorers. They posted about it on their Facebook page (#yourtolldollarsatwork).

Goats are climbers, so they were doing pretty well on their little outing until they got to a barrier that they couldn’t get past. They had to turn around and head back the other way. The brown goat managed to get turned around, but the white one was stuck facing the wrong direction.

The brown goat kept butting the white one on the head trying to get it to move backwards, “It would take one step, two steps back, then stop’… And really, can you blame it? Would you want to walk backward on a beam that is about 8 inches wide and 100 feet above the ground? Yeah, me neither.”

They brought in a crane that is usually used to inspect bridges, and Steve McCarthy, a civil engineer for bridge inspection was about to live the story of a lifetime. He attempted to get the white goat turned around, but the goat was refusing. Finally, out of desperation, Steve just grabbed the goat and held it until he and the goat were safely on the ground. They then tapped the beam of the bridge with a pole to encourage the brown goat to make its way to safety.

Asked about the incident afterwards, Steve said, “It was my first goat extraction… I said, ‘I’m going for it,’ ” he recalls. "I grabbed the goat as tight as I could... there was no way I was letting go of that goat."

I realize this is goats and not sheep... and it’s a narrow piece of metal, not the Valley of the Shadow of Death... but given the details of our world right now, it can feel like we’re in a precarious position... with barriers we can't get around. And yet our faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, tells us that Jesus has the power to save humanity even in the direst of circumstances.

The LORD is my shepherd...
Yes, we are vulnerable and exposed on all fronts, but the Good Shepherd is right there with us, not simply as a non-anxious presence, not merely as a faithful cheerleader, but as the one who graciously, lavishly provides for all our needs.

We belong to the Shepherd.  
We belong to the Shepherd when we walk through the valley.  
We belong to the One who invites all to dwell in the house of the Lord now and forevermore.  
We belong to this One whose goodness and mercy will not rest until we do.\textsuperscript{ii}

_Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever._

Whether we just need a nudge in the right direction, or a full out rescue, Jesus holds us as tight as he can. There’s no way he’s letting us go.

Jesus holds.
Jesus loves.
Jesus saves.

In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.
The Reverend Julia Seymour, https://revgalblogpals.org/2019/05/10/friday-prayer-31/