

Psalm 23: 1-6/Acts 4: 8-13/Matthew 16:13-19

“Even if I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil...”

For me, Psalm 23 provides the basis for understanding the braveness Jesus as we read His Story in the Gospel of Matthew today. Matthew 16:13ff presents to us the beginning of Jesus’ passion. For the disciples and some of us, passion discourse starts in chapter 26 of Matthew, this explains the difference between a producer and a consumer, a producer sees the beauty of the product before it is even manufactured but for the producer the beauty is only realized after the product is finished. In Chapter 16, Jesus is already aware of the problems that were awaiting Him and what He is doing here is to test if the disciples were equipped enough to **walk through the valley of the shadow of death**. If Jesus faced resistance in from the Jews, I guess worse would have been expected from the Gentiles as He is now approaching the region of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was first called Dan, then La’ish before it was renamed Caesarea Philippi or Caesarea of Philip by Philip the Tetrarch in honour of Tiberius Caesar. This renaming was done to distinguish it from another Caesarea in the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. However, as Jesus entered this pagan city, surely, He should have anticipated severe resistance. If it was me, I would have avoided passing through the region of Caesarea Philippi. But Jesus as someone well oriented in Jewish literature might have drawn His courage and strength from scriptures like Psalm 23, **“The Lord is my Shephard, even if I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil...”**

The book of Acts Chapter 4 presents to us Peter and John fearlessly walking through the valley of the shadow of death. After healing the crippled beggar and preaching about the resurrection of Jesus, Peter and John were put in remand, they spend the whole night there and the next day they were brought before the Jewish Council. They were interrogated, **“By what power or by what name did you do this?** Listen to the braveness of Peter in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death, **“Be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well”**. Peter as a pure Jew, well conversant with the Jewish literature

should only have drawn this kind of courage and strength from Psalm 23, **“The Lord is my shepherd, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil...”**

The Psalmist, Jesus, Peter, and John knew that evil was real and sometimes cannot be avoided but God’s grace is sufficient even in the valley and shadow of death. Jesus, Peter, and John had enemies/challenges just like us, but for them the good thing was that they had faith that God had their back. We can all agree that we are walking in the valley of the shadow of death, but we are being assured this morning that, the Lord is our Shephard, and we shall not want, even if we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will not be afraid.

Verse 6 of Psalm 23 put the seal conversation this morning, **“Finally, we come to the house of the Lord, surely, his goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”**. This verse speaks to the intimate, personal experiences of trust in God. The main reason why people had different opinions of Jesus is simply because their experiences were also different. When they looked at Jesus, some saw John the Baptist manifesting; others saw Elijah manifesting; some saw the works of Jeremiah and others saw one of those old prophets. However, all that was right but matters less, what matters most was the question, **“Who then do you say I am?”** The personal intimate relationship with Christ especially for us who are mandated to carry the gospel to all the world. Yes, the authority seems to have been given to Peter, but the same authority is given to all the believers in Matthew 18:18. We can only carry the gospel and fulfill the mandate if we can answer to the question, **“Who do we think Jesus is in our lives”**.

The moment we respond to this question perfectly, we are not only showing readiness to spread the gospel, but this also becomes the glue that brings us together for a common cause as the community of faith. And we will fearlessly testify that, **“The Lord is our Shephard, even if we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will not be afraid. And we shall dwell in the house of God forever”**. Amen.