

We live a a time between the times. Between war and peace, between faith and doubt, between birth and death, between the people we actually are the ones we'd like to become. In such a time, we need a map by which to chart our way forward. And I can think of no better map for navigating the difficult passages of life than the 23rd Psalm. It marks a passage through time, not just for each of us personally, but for entire communities and nations.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Instantly the image of the shepherd god springs to mind. It is easy to imagine the green meadows, the grass caressed by the gentle breeze of an afternoon in the spring. We can almost see the sheep lying in the golden light of the sun, have been filled to satisfaction grazing in the lush pastures all the day long.

Nearby we hear the dancing waters of a mountain brook; we see the shepherd rousing his sheep, guiding them, leading them, around those steep places where the water rushes down the mountainside in a torrent. The shepherd leads them to a place of

safety beneath the shadow of an overhanging tree, where the water stands still and clear.

"He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul."

Typically, our very first conception of God is very much like that shepherd. We think of God as a person who watches over us with the warm, protecting love of father or mother. As we contemplate these opening verses, we are filled with the same confidence and security which we have known as children.

And so these verses draw us back in time to that point when we were at one with God. To a moment in our lives like that of the very first Christmas when God was present in a moment of mystical illumination before our days of doubt and anxiety. Amid the tensions of adult life, it is refreshing to remember this mood of childlike trust and to let the shepherd God lead us beside still water.

Yet in the very next verse the mood changes, the scene shifts from the beauty and quiet of the mountain stream to the terrifying danger of the mountains themselves.

**"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow
of death."**

Here we find ourselves in the very depths of a great canyon, surrounded on all sides by the sheer rock; those walls rising up so high and so sharply on all sides that the light of the sun scarcely penetrates to this place deep in the crevices of the earth. In the shadows it is dark and cold ...

We have walked into the very heart of darkness, "the valley of deep darkness" it is called in the Hebrew. In fact, the word death does not appear in the original, for the experience here described is actually more terrifying than death.

The deep darkness of the valley is the despair we feel when the faith of our childhood seems to have failed. When mother or father can no longer comfort us; when God seems remote and abstract from our daily experience. Or worse, when one confronts the damaging influences of ones early childhood, realizing that mother or father may have contributed to the problems one faces now. Or worse, when the dilemmas one faces in adult life seem to be brought upon us by God's own hand. This is the darkness that

penetrates to the very center of the soul; this is the darkness of our present age, when the benefits of our scientific and technical age still leave us feeling bereft. This is our time, when neither the innocence of childhood, nor the peace of death itself can protect us from the dangers of a world that is all too real.

And yet it is precisely here, in the valley of the shadow of death, that one reaches out to discover a presence and a power greater than we have known before. For it is in the midst of life, in the time of doubt, that a God appears who leads us in "paths of righteousness."

Paths of righteousness.

This rather quaint phrase held over from the King James version carries with it an unfortunate connotation today. For we imagine righteousness to be a state of superior virtue; we imagine someone rather stodgy and straightlaced; someone full of heavy judgment and pious cliché. But that's not the sort of thing the psalmist had in mind.

The Hebrew word for righteousness connotes action which is taken to uphold the physical and mental health of a community.

In Hebrew, righteousness connotes a sense of responsibility and a hunger for justice. That is the path which God would have us take in this adult world.

We must not merely speak platitudes about peace, for example, we must actually inform ourselves about the questions of war and peace, about the causes of conflict in our own lives and in the world around us, so that we can address them. If we are to follow God into paths of righteousness, we must be prepared to take realistic, practical actions to promote justice in our own homes, in our own communities, and in the wider world. We must be prepared to take our principles into the marketplace and into the polling place so that we the people might actually walk in "paths of righteousness." In other words, we must move from the child's simplicity and trust into the adult world, where we face all the conflict and competing interests which arise wherever people organize themselves into a society.

Yet, however deeply we may be embroiled in the complexities of this world, as we walk in paths of righteousness, we may draw upon a strength greater than our own. The psalmist

writes: "Even though I walk through the valley of deep darkness, I fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and they staff, they comfort me."

The shepherd's rod is a large club often with a steel tip used as a weapon against the wild animals and bandits that one might encounter in the wilderness. Armed with such a weapon, the shepherd could move with confidence even through the wilderness landscape. The shepherd's staff is a long pole used to keep balance while negotiating the difficult terrain of the mountain trails. So the shepherd could scale the dangerous heights with a sense of confidence that he would not fall.

So it is with those who seek the justice of God in this time between the times. One emerges from the darkness filled with a confidence that comes from God. And so it is that we move through these times of terror.

Apparently the palmist now imagines a pilgrim who has been involved in a dangerous struggle with an unnamed opponent. He takes flight into the vast reaches of the wilderness, but the

enemy follows. As the hours pass, the situation becomes more critical. Running short of food and water, the end appears near. With each passing mile, the foe gains more ground. But then, just as the situation seems hopeless, he climbs over the ridge of a gentle hill, and there, in the quiet of a peaceful valley, are the bright colors of the tents, an encampment of Bedouin nomads.

According to desert custom, he need only approach those tents and he will be safe. He need only reach out and touch the outer walls of the tent, and the Bedouin will welcome the stranger. They provide the protection of their arms, the warmth of their hospitality, while the pursuing enemy is stymied outside the camp.

This seems to be the exact situation described by the psalmist: "Thou preparest a table before me even in the presence of my enemies." Read as a parable from a Christian perspective, this feast represents communion. Here is the table of Christian fellowship, where the pilgrim is strengthened, not only by the hospitality of his companions, but also by the spirit of Christ, who is the lord of the camp and host at our common meal.

And so it is that the church is a place of sanctuary and protection from the world, where one can sense the warmth and hospitality and even the love of those who welcome any passing stranger. But the psalm contains promise of strength greater still than that which other people can provide.

**"Thou annointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of
my life."**

Goodness and mercy shall follow. Follow is a rather weak verb. A more accurate translation of the Hebrew would be "pursue." Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me.

As soldiers pursue an enemy in full retreat, as the hunter tracks his prey; as the wind of winter chases the falling snow, so goodness and mercy shall hunt us down. In this world we are pursued by many different people and causes. We are chased by bill collectors and tax collectors, hunted by salesmen and credit card companies, followed by old age and always by the shadow of sickness and eventually by death. But as the Psalmist declares, we are also pursued by the goodness and mercy of God. Behind

the ephemeral events of our daily lives, the spirit of God is at work, watching over us, supporting us, speeding us on our way.

And so we reach the final step in our journey through time. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Suddenly the walls of the Bedouin tent open up and we are ushered into the very presence of God:

"I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

No one really knows what awaits us beyond the barriers of time and space, yet somehow this image beckons to us like a bright morning star. If it is beautiful and pleasant to come in off the crowded streets and highways to a home filled with warmth and light, how much more beautiful to enter into the very presence of God. This is the same promise and the same image that Jesus used: "In my fathers house there are many rooms."

At the very close of life we are as close to God as the new born baby held in its mothers arms. In death we return to the source, so we come full circle. And this map charts out a

pilgrimage which takes us all the way from the beginning to the end.

In moments of inspiration we seem to stand like the child in green pastures. Like the characters in the stable at Bethlehem we feel the presence of God pouring down upon us more comforting than the light of the summer's sun. And yet again when that moment of inspiration fades, when the clouds gather, and we find ourselves in the valley of deep darkness, there the foundations of our faith seem to shake. We are put to the test, yet being tested, we find a presence and a power greater than we can either ask or imagine.

We leave the darkness, armed once again with God's sure staff. So that in this wilderness, in the wild places of our daily lives, we can find our way with a sense of courage and a confidence that comes even in the eye of the storm.

And it is here, in the time between the times, that we learn the value of the support that comes from our fellow pilgrims. In moments of intimate conversation, over a meal with our closest friends, breaking the communion bread together, we can say:

"Thou preparest a table before me, even in the presence of my enemies; Thou annointest my head with oil, my cup is overflowing."

Finally, as we look ahead, even beyond the limits of this day and age, we are filled with deep conviction: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow, all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

So in this time between the times, between birth and death, between creation and consummation, between peace and war, as God is our guide the way shall be made plain and the passage sure through the pilgrimage we call our lives. Thanks be to God.