



water from rock

## **Selah: Stop, Look, Listen- December 3, 2022**

The Lord be with you.

Do the holidays ever seem to you like the hollow days?

Well they did for me many, many years ago when my young wife had died from cancer. Let me tell you, the holidays were tough. And when I was a chaplain for hospice, we would often speak of the holidays as the hollow days. And we actually had a special service right before Christmas for all the family members who had lost a loved one during the year. And we'd call that loved one's name and give a lit candle to the family.

I talk to you today well aware that this past year that it's been difficult. Well aware that even with all the Christmas lights going up that things can seem dark. Their family problems, health problems, financial problems, too much month left at the end of the paycheck. Well, I have a couple of verses I want to share with you from the well known Shepherd psalm Psalm 23, where I read verses three and four where David speaking from life experience says of the Lord, his shepherd. He leads me in right paths for his namesake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley. That's what the Hebrew text literally says, darkest valley. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me.

I like how many of the stories that we tell and retell at Christmas time that they are stories about light shining through into dark places. I mean, there's a movie classic about poor old George Bailey at the end of his ropes who was wanting to end his life. There's the underpaid underappreciated clerk Bob Cratchit and his dying son Tiny Tim. And the story of a financially troubled Jim Mandela in Oh Henry's short story, the Gift of the Magi. And what child will ever forget the citizens of Whoville waking up on Christmas day only to discover the Grinch had stolen all their presents? Even a secular post Christian culture likes a story of a poor baby in the manger. We like, we need stories of light and hope in dark places.

Now these verses of Psalm 23 that I just read there, they are about God's light breaking into what David calls the darkest valley. David has just told us, sure, that the Lord our shepherd, he leads us in right paths for his namesake. Those right paths have led David, he says, to green pastures besides still waters. But note that David also says that God leads him in right paths through the darkest valley.

The Hebrew words that are translated as darkest valley are variously translated in other Old Testament scriptures as black gloom, deepest darkness, thick darkness, deep shadow, and yes, shadow of death. The ancient Hebrews use these words for well for any kind of trouble, grief, sorrow, just the sort of thing that might make our holidays hollow days.



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Read the Old Testament books of Samuel Kings Chronicles and and you will see how many times David has been led into life's darkest valley. Notice the very significant change of pronoun as David writes these lines. Here David suddenly changes from the third person singular to the second person singular. As David began the Psalm talking about the Lord as his shepherd, he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me besides still waters. He restores my soul. But notice that as David comes to the darkest valley, that David stops talking about his shepherd and he begins talking to his shepherd. I fear no evil for you, you are with me. You see, it was in David's darkest valley that he learned in his experience that the Lord really is with us.

I wrote this year's Advent devotional, Immanuel, God is with us because I've learned in my own experience, in my own darkest valleys, that the Lord really is with us. That in our darkest valley, God's presence becomes more real than ever before. And we find ourselves no longer just talking about the Lord. We find ourselves talking to the Lord. I fear no evil for you are with me. We never walk through the darkest valley alone. Jesus, Immanuel is always with us. For the Virgin has conceived and born us a son. And his name is Immanuel God is with us. God is with you and me in our dark valleys. That's something I learned years ago when the holidays had become hollow. And I pray that God's presence might be very real to you during these coming days.

I am Tim Smith, a fellow traveler. Thank you for listening. Until next time.