

The Way x02. Sunday 13 January_2019.

READ: PSALM 23 and JOHN 10:11-18.

Encourage creativity – poetry, song, prophecy, meditation and contemplation this year on The Way.

We aim to see through our study and reflection on Scripture this year a clear thread of teaching and revelation about God showing a way forward and a way through that we can follow.

There are prophecies in the **OT** about this and we heard a little of this in our Watch Night gather when Geoff spoke from *Isaiah 43: 19 – 21* on *I'm making a way through the dessert.*

In the **NT** we read of John the Baptist calling out to people to *prepare a way for the Messiah to enter in* and Jesus' own claim in response to questions that he is the Way to the Father God. (This verse from *John 14: 6* will be featured in the Week of Prayer).

In the early Church we read of **men and women who “belonged to *the Way*” (Acts 9:2; 22:4)** *The Way* became a title describing followers of Jesus - the name of their belief before the term Christian was used.

In Scripture, there is abundant advice for what path in life will provide the most meaning and fulfillment. Our path refers to *the way* we live and what we decide to do with our limited time on earth.

We enter the New Year with the knowledge that even though we step into the darkness of the unknown (term I used) we have the Light of God with us to guide us in the way that we should go: *Psalm 119: 105 Your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light to my path.*

Today: the true Shepherd leads the Way.

Many scriptures in the OT elaborate the idea that God is the Good Shepherd. *Genesis 48: 15* Here Jacob brings a blessing, *The God who has been my Shepherd all my life to this day bless them.* The classic Shepherd Psalm is of course the one read to us *Psalm 23 The LORD is my Shepherd...* which describes God's shepherding those who follow through the pathway of life's experiences. **It illustrates the forward leading of the shepherd – in the Middle East the shepherd is always pictured as going before rather than driving from the rear.** In *Psalm 78: 52 and 53* God is described as *shepherding the people out in the exodus from Egypt. Making a way through the sea and the dessert.*

***Psalm 23* describes the different situations and experiences that the Shepherd leads the sheep into – not all easy and restful by any means.** Verse 2 describes blissful experiences that we “the sheep” can experience as God leads us. There is the resting and being restored in green fields with lush pasture and quiet pools of fresh

water. What more could a sheep or a person want than rest and good food and water! And v3 affirms that God the Shepherd guides me on the “right paths” – as promised.

But v4 makes the significant and contrasting statement that these “right paths” can include leading us into the “deepest darkness” (TEV) or “the valley of the shadow of death”. Those places which we know we experience as hostile – where it is hard to see the light because of the shadow cast. These are the times when we experience fear and face fear and the Psalmist says – God the Shepherd will *protect his sheep, will protect me with rod and staff* – speak of God’s strength, authority and command to both lift me out of danger into the Shepherd’s arms but also to beat and chase off any wolf, bear or mountain lion. Any spiritual, emotional enemy that means me harm.

I find no promise in Scripture that these who follow the Shepherd will never experience some of the deepest darkness, but I do find the promise of God’s leading presence and protection. The Shepherd will lead me through and out. Indeed the Psalmist – David the Shepherd King goes on to speak of feasting – picnicking in the dessert while our enemies look on. He details life’s experiences not just as sometimes deep darkness but of *Goodness and Mercy* following on every single day of my life and the certainty of an eternal home with God – *I will dwell in the house of the LORD, forever.*

This is a Psalm about life’s realities and **God’s leading through** restful restorative times and also times of deep darkness. The certainty for the Psalmist is the loving Shepherd leading us into and through these experiences of life. **Do we pray just for easy times?** (Hymn written by *Love Maria Whitcomb Willis* and rewritten by Longfellow)

Father, hear the prayer we offer:
Nor for ease that prayer shall be,
But for strength, that we may ever
Live our lives courageously.

Not forever in green pastures
Do we ask our way to be,
But the steep and rugged pathway
May we tread rejoicingly.

Not forever by still waters
Would we idly, quiet stay;
But would smite the living fountains
From the rocks along our way.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,
In our wanderings be our Guide;
Through endeavor, failure, danger,
Father, be Thou at our side.

(Sussex version by preference).

It is into all this OT background that Jesus speaks of Shepherds and also the warning of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel that Israel’s leaders are often false and bad shepherds that Jesus declares: I am the Good Shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep.

He warns against others who have pretended to be shepherds simply so that they may steal, kill and destroy. Others simply did not have the sheep's best interest at heart.

JESUS as the Good Shepherd – will always lead us and face the delight or the danger before we enter into it. He goes before ...

As we consider again today, around the Table – the Good Shepherd will die to save his sheep. He will freely offer himself as a sacrifice – Jesus is our Passover lamb as well as our Shepherd. In verse 17 Jesus the Son speaks of the Father God's love for him and his willingness to offer up his life (and take it up again) simply for the sheep. The intimate and knowing relationship of God the Father is spoken of and also their deep knowledge of what the sheep require. Jesus speaks about coming so that we might experience life in fullness.

Jesus contrasts his love for the sheep with that of a man simply hired to do a job for pay. He did what he did and does what he does for love of us and the Father. Jesus speaks of those from other flocks coming to join the one flock.

Most clearly of all we hear Jesus declare that **those who belong to him will follow his voice. They will not follow the voice of a false shepherd!** In our journey on life's path it is the voice of Jesus that we must come to learn to recognise and follow. He alone will love us enough to call us into whatever he has for us – restful restorative experiences or even through the deepest darkness. He will call us to follow through with him and not to be diverted. **To be with the Shepherd is our desire and goal.**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cog_grSFINs 3.32 minutes video clip