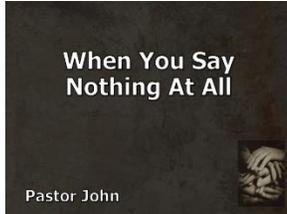


"When You Say Nothing at All"

April 22, 2018

Scripture: Psalm 23

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.



Well, there are certainly times when we have been there, where you felt like there was nothing to say or to be said.

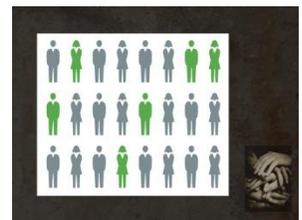
Just being present was enough in those moments. This title can also apply to those moments when we just knew that it was best to keep our mouths shut. Sometimes it was because saying something or saying more would just make the situation worse. Sometimes it was because nothing more needed to be said. We had said our peace and it was time to let things rest. And then there are the situations where we knew we should have said this or that, but we said nothing at all. We later have that "I wish I would have said..." moments. Today, as we continue with our "Belong, Behave, Believe" series, we will again look at how we belong. Today we will wrestle with how we belong, first and foremost, in God's presence as we reflect on the 23rd Psalm. Let us pray.

It was early in the evening on a nice July day when Greg got the phone call. We were working on a roofing project that happened to be a few blocks from the school. Coach Ferdinand called to summon Greg to the practice football field. After the first evening of voluntary summer mini-camp, Ryan had collapsed as the team huddled around the coaches. It was then that we heard sirens. Greg scrambled down off the roof and headed to the school. I prayed nonstop as I buttoned things up as quickly as I could and then drove to the school. Just Greg's truck was in the parking lot. I rolled up the windows on his truck, locked the doors, and headed to the hospital. On the way I called Kristin and asked her to come get Matthew. I sensed something was really wrong. Matthew had been helping us on the job. Ryan had been helping too before heading off to practice. I did not know what I would find at the hospital.

When we arrived in the emergency room, we found a room full of coaches and lots of football players. I found head coach Paul Ferdinand with a group of other coaches and he told me briefly what had happened. All were nervously waiting for news. Kristin arrived and I sent Matthew home with her after a brief conversation. After I don't know how long - it felt like forever - I was called into a room by a doctor. Inside the room, Greg and Sue sat with the pastor from their church. Greg told me that Ryan was gone. After a few words of consolation to Greg and Sue, I simply sat there and prayed silently for them. The pastor shared a few words and then excused himself. A nurse came in and asked Greg and Sue if they wanted to come back to the room. They did. I asked if he wanted me to stay and he said he did, so I followed them back to the room where Ryan was. Sue and Greg sat in chairs next to the bed and I stood

next to them. As Greg's parents arrived with Greg and Sue's daughter Sarah and as Greg's sisters arrived, a few words were exchanged. I went and got Sue a Coke. When I went back to the emergency room to buy the Coke, the room was almost empty. The hospital staff must have shared the news with the coaches and players. At some point in the wee hours of the morning, Greg and Sue decided it was time to go home. We all hugged and I told them I'd see them the next day. As I reflect back on that night, being there in and just outside that room, I do not think I said more than a couple dozen words. I hugged a lot of Grambergs and put my arm around a lot of them. I was simply present. It was a time when I said almost nothing at all.

The sudden loss of a child or a spouse or close friend is something that we never expect. Yet it happens. We all know someone and many of us know several someones who have been affected by one of these traumatic losses. They are life-altering losses and we are never the same after such an event. There are other difficult things in life that people struggle with as well. Medical diagnoses and prescriptions tell us that about twenty-five percent of the population is struggling with some form of depression. This statistic that represents one in four people does not include all those who are undiagnosed yet are dealing with some form of depression. So, in reality, there are at least two or three more "green people" in this illustration. Statistically speaking, people born in the last fifty years are ten times more likely than the previous generations to struggle with some form of depression. Mental health experts in our country are calling this rise in depression an epidemic.



Closely related to the rise of depression is the increase in suicide rates in our nation. What used to be a seldom-used attempt to end the pain of life has become more widespread and much more common. For example, over the last thirty years, the suicide rate amongst the young has quadrupled. Yet over this same period, the suicide rates among groups like the Amish have remained stable. Statistics are similar for the rate of depression. Perhaps there is something to learn here. In our modern world, the pace of life and the expectations that we set for ourselves have increased dramatically. The 'do more, have more' mentality that we have today in our culture has led to a dramatic increase in stress and pressure which places an ever-increasing burden on our souls, on our emotions, and on our relationships.

Our Psalm today refers to "*the darkest valley*" that we often walk through in life. That night in the hospital with Greg and Sue and their family and the days and weeks that followed were certainly a darkest valley. There have been other dark nights in my life and you have all certainly had your share as well. For some, the dark valleys can last for days or weeks or months. Statistically speaking, if there are two hundred people here today for worship, there will be at least fifty people here this morning dealing with some form of depression. Today there are a lot of anxious and painfully sad people in our society and certainly here in our church, walking daily through a long and dark valley. Friends, if that is you, know that you are not alone. We are in this together. Friends, here you belong. Here, we walk through the good and bad of life together. And here, Jesus walks with us.

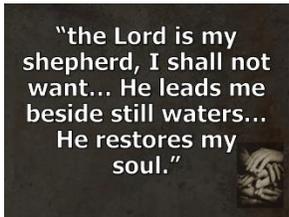




When You Say
Nothing At All

In our society today, feeling blue has become the common cold of our human existence. It is a fever that comes and goes, or sometimes stays just above or below the surface. It contrasts sharply to the times of joy and love and peace that we also experience in our lives. Like in the Psalm, they are the times when we are in "*green pastures*" and there are times when "*our cup overflows*". There are these moments when life is good and we are happy and we feel connected to God. In Ecclesiastes 3:11 we read, "*God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.*" While this is eternally true, we often live as hurting souls in an imperfect world. We experience highs and lows in life, but most often we live between the mountaintops and the valleys.

I think scriptures like the 23rd Psalm were written for this broken and beautiful in-between space that we often live our lives. When anxious thoughts begin to creep into our minds, it is good to remember that "*the LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want... He leads me beside still waters... He restores my soul*". To know that God is always present, always seeking to guide us through the valleys, always looking to love and care for the sheep of His fold - it is a great comfort to us all. In times of grief and in times of stress alike, this Psalm is a great one to recite and to pray through. Whether bedside in a hospital or sitting alone in the dark, these words of David can bring us great comfort. It is a passage that we can lean into and can claim for our own in those times of need. To pray or say this Psalm over and over leads us to a place of stillness and brings restoration to our souls. Please join me in reciting these words from the 23rd Psalm:



"the Lord is my
shepherd, I shall not
want... He leads me
beside still waters...
He restores my
soul."

"the LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want... He leads me beside still waters... He restores my soul"... "the LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want... He leads me beside still waters... He restores my soul"... "the LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want... He leads me beside still waters... He restores my soul".

When You Say
Nothing At All



There are definitely times when a word from scripture can buoy our spirits and lift our souls. But there are also those rare times when the teachings, truths, and words of faith lose their influence with someone who is hurting. Sometimes our presence is the most powerful thing we can offer to someone deep in pain or anguish. Sometimes trying to tell people how to behave or what to believe, although well-intentioned, can be misplaced and even harmful. Sometimes the words we leave unspoken are the most important words. We have all been there. We just need to let them know that they are loved and that they belong.

A young man's wife became very ill and died, leaving him alone with his four-year old daughter. The funeral service was simple and heavy with grief. After the burial, his neighbors gathered around him and invited them to bring his little girl and stay at one of their homes this first night. They wanted to spare him the pain going home to an empty house. He thanked them but said that he and his baby girl needed to face it now. When they got home the father brought his daughter's little bed into his room, so they could face the dark night together.

As the minutes slipped by that night, the little girl was having a hard time sleeping; and so was the dad. Nothing could pierce his heart more than hearing

his little girl sobbing for a mother who would never come back. Long in the night the daughter continued to weep. The father comforted her the best he could. Finally, the little girl managed to stop crying and the father thought she had fallen asleep. The father looked up toward heaven and said, "Father, I trust you, but...it's as dark as midnight." Hearing her dad's prayer, the little girl began to cry again. "I thought you were asleep, baby," said her father. "Papa," the girl said, "I did try — but I couldn't go to sleep. Papa, did you ever know it could be so dark? Papa, I can't even see you, it's so dark. Then she drew close and whispered "But, you love me even if it's dark — don't you Papa? You love me even if I don't see you — don't you, Papa?"

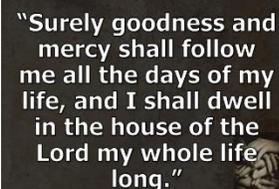
As an answer, the father lifted his little girl out of her bed; brought her up to his chest; and held her until she went to sleep. That's when he took his little daughter's words and offered them up to God. "Father, it's dark as midnight. I can't see you at all. But you love me even when it's dark and I can't see you, don't You?"

In the darkest of valleys, sometimes it feels as if we cannot even see anything. And even though we cannot see God and sometimes cannot even sense His presence in the dark valley, it is important to remember verse four: *"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me"*. This verse reminds us that even in the darkest valley, God still loves us. God always loves us.

*"Even though
I walk through
the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are
with me."*



When we look at the 23rd Psalm, it is interesting to note that God offers comfort and peace and strength and presence without speaking a word. God says nothing but simply invites us to lie down, to sit beside still waters, to find rest for our souls. God leads us, comforts us, prepares a table for us, and anoints us with the overflowing oil of blessing. The Psalm concludes with these wonderful words: *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long"*. Whether in the valley, on the mountaintop, or someplace in between, we dwell in the house of the Lord our whole life long. In doing so, goodness and mercy surely are ours.



"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."

If you are one of the fortunate ones here this morning who are not wrestling with or feeling weighed down by depression or anxiety or stress or doubt, there is a good chance that there is someone in your family or in your classroom or in your work place or in your pew who is. At times, we can and do call upon the truths found in scripture to remind one another of God's power and strength and presence in and over our lives. At times, we must remind each other of these truths so that we all can find hope in the Lord. The Good Shepherd is always seeking and searching for the sheep who feel lost – those who are struggling in life, those who feel that they are always running uphill, those who are walking through dark valleys. May we ever be people who are looking to connect others to God, especially the least and the lost and the broken. It is in the connection that the sense of belonging begins to grow. Behavior and belief rarely heal a heart. Belonging always does. May we, as followers of Christ, help others know that they too belong to Christ, our hope and our salvation. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) As you have grown in your faith, how has the Word of God been instrumental in your trials? Note the passages that you cling to.
- 2) On your bulletin, name some folks who struggle with depression or stress or anxiety. Spend time each day this week praying for them.
- 3) Putting together your answers for #1 and #2, share the Word of God with the people you know who need to hear it. Call, visit, or send a message.