

Living next to a community center and a great athletic field, I can see every morning and throughout the day many people come to the community center and enjoy athletic activities. People of all ages gather around and participate in group games. I especially enjoy seeing little kids barely 5 years-old, all decked out in uniforms and play soccer and baseball games on that green, grass field. They are so cute, and so full of life, you just cannot keep your eyes on the road, as you drive by.

It is a nice feeling, knowing that this is a very special moment that people take, no doubt, for granted. The bright sunshine, balmy weather, the sight of beautiful and healthy children shouting and running, the young and older people alike jogging around, pushing the strollers, throwing the tennis ball for the dog to run after, little kids riding their bikes, or just having a suntan... Just being near them, you can sense this feeling of contentment in the air.

Those are regular, everyday activities on the grass field of community center, but when you look at the people engaged in those activities from a certain perspective, it is a picture of a peaceful, fun-filled day. It may seem like an ordinary day, but it sure is a special privilege to be able to live the day. You can think of many other ways in which others are denied from living and enjoying such a peaceful, ordinary day.

I myself had the privilege of having to work, standing on my feet 10 hours a day for 6 days for a low wage. I say it was a privilege, because it opened my eyes, and helped me vicariously understand what retail workers must do, in order to provide for their families. They have virtually no humanity left, because the customer can say anything to the employees. The management is always afraid of losing the business, so that they breathe hot air down the necks of the powerless employee who cannot lose that job.

After work, when I came home, I did not even have energy to read the newspapers. After a few weeks, I made the point of going out to the nearby park to jog, because I did not have the time to exercise. Not surprisingly, I did not feel like jogging either. Even walking was too energy-consuming and difficult. I often ended up sitting in the couch in front of the TV set.

If I thought I was having a difficult time, and pontificated and theologized about the hardship of life, I was blind to what my wife was going through. Being a male, I let my wife do grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, and the laundry—most of the time.

If we are wondering why working women are gaining weight, try working long hours on your feet at low wage, and then come home to cook, clean, and do the laundry. If you are exhausted in the body and soul, there is no energy left for pontificating or theologizing, much less for exercising or

dieting. You just want to eat, because you are hungry; you just want to rest, because your body is tired; and you just want to be comforted, because your soul has been abused all day long by immoral, petty human beings at work. But your hubby asks, what's for dinner, and complains that there isn't a clean dish left in the cupboard.

If we lift up our eyes from our own lives, and look at our surroundings, we would find that some people struggle to find jobs, some endure the long hours on their feet with low wages, only to deal with lying and mean customers, while others deal with crooked and inhumane people all day long. On top of that, they may have to come home to the dysfunction in the families, health problems, tragedies, and legal problems. And somehow, reading Psalm 23 is going to provide comfort and rejuvenation to those who survived the daily wreck from their jobs? How does it work?

Psalm 23 is the favorite of great number of people. It gives the readers the sense of tranquil peace. Is it why it is often chosen at the funerals and memorial services, I do not know. Obviously, it is more therapeutic to the living than to the deceased. It is difficult to live with the thought that your beloved one is somehow denied of the green pasture and still waters in the afterlife.

To those who are weary of the harsh life, nevertheless, the poetry of the Psalm gives the sense of a welcome respite. Or, does that piece of scripture actually help those who are going through the difficult daily lives which I attempted to caricature earlier? Do they actually feel as if they are led to the green pastures and to the still waters, because they read Psalm 23?

Then I had to ask myself: How many people actually live their days, as if they are lying down in green pastures, or led to the still waters? How many people can claim that the mood of Psalm 23

reflects honestly their individual lives?

Who feels his or her life is like that of a content sheep whose welfare is taken care of by a shepherd? The abundance of food and water, no threat from wolves, peace and tranquility all around! Maybe there are people who could live like that, but I doubt that they are many. Maybe there are people who honestly feel that the Psalm describes their lives, in spite of all the hardships. Maybe they are willing to overlook the hardships for the positive side of life.

Or, maybe they are willing to ignore the present pain for the brighter and abundant future which believing in the psalm would bring about. For the rest, the psalm is just a religious poetry, and they strive to survive in this competitive world. For them, the sentiment of Psalm 23 has no therapeutic power—only the sheer, materialistic world view makes sense to them, and the boundary of reality ends right there.

Whatever their reasons, one thing is clear. The writer of Psalm 23 learned that there was only one thing that mattered, and all others were extras. The only thing which mattered to the Psalmist was:

23:4 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.

And from this verse the kernel of that which mattered to the Psalmist the most is:

"for you are with me."

What really mattered to the Psalmist, that is, the ultimate reality that trumped all other aspects of reality was that his God was *with* him.

This conviction was echoed by Paul who wrote to the Romans:

8:31 If God is for us, who is against us?

Because of this conviction, the Psalmist confessed that even though he walked through the

darkest valley, he feared no evil. He knew that God's strength and power would protect him, and that knowledge comforted him.

As we live through our days, sometimes it feels as if we are going through the darkest valley of life. It may be caused by losing the job, or by bodily illnesses, or by failing relationships, or by emotional and psychological state of mind. Generally, the bleak prospect of one's life would cause one to feel that way. There are so many things of life that can go wrong, and sweep us into the turmoil and fear.

To those who have the conviction that "God walks with me," that "God leads me through my life," no darkest valley can destroy their spirits. God's rod and staff help the spirits of the faithful overcome all the assault life can heap upon.

There come times, when it is not possible to avoid the darkest valleys of life. Sometimes, we just have to walk through the

darkest valleys of life. Yet you shall fear no evil, for your God is with you; your God's rod and staff comfort you.

Jesus explained to his disciples the parable of the sower. Some seeds fall on the road, some seeds fall on the rocky ground, and some into thorny bushes. If the listener does not understand the word, the evil one snatches the word away from the mind of the person. Believing without understanding is a risky thing. It opens up the opportunity for the evil one to enter the believer's life. The tribulations and persecutions cause the believers to fall away, and the cares of the world make the believer fruitless.

Some Christians are like fair-weather Christians. They delight in the green pastures and still waters. Everything is fine, until the dark cloud forms overhead, lightning flashes across the sky, and thunderclap rattles the window pane. Then they fail, quite predictably. The bridges that cannot withstand the wind and the traffic, the levees that

cannot hold the water, the firefighters who cannot stand the heat, the stock speculators who unload at the sign of trouble, the soldiers who retreat at the first shot—they all share the common trait with the fair-weather Christians. They would not dare walk through the darkest valley.

The true faith grows in the darkest of the valleys. If we are to grow in our faith and in our relationship with God, we must walk through the darkest valley. We witness the strength of God—God's rod and God's staff—when we boldly step into the darkest valley.

We cannot experience God's strength, while we relax in Cancun. We cannot expect to see God's strength, at the height of profit and success. We may want to take them as the signs of God's blessing, but no, they are not the sign of God's rod and staff—we tend to confuse God's strength with the worldly strength and the ownership of material goods. God's strength is

witnessed, instead, in the darkest valley.

Paul testifies to the Romans when God's strength is witnessed:

8:26 - Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

God comes to our aid, when we are weak. We do not need God, when we are strong, just as the healthy do not need a physician; and God would rather be with those who are weak. Paul captured what Jesus understood clearly throughout his ministry, and shared it with the Romans.

Jesus never sought those who were in power or those who were rich. The wealthy and the powerful had to come to Jesus. And they came to Jesus, because they realized the limit of their power and strength. They, too, realized that they were walking through the darkest valley of their own. They realized that

there was the greater power that could *do* what their own wealth and power could not do.

Where is the good soil in which faith flourishes? The good soil is the people who walk through the darkest valley, trusting that God leads them even in the midst of the barren wilderness of life.

May you grow and flourish, as you walk through the darkest valley, and bear the fruit in one case, one hundred fold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.