

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Fifty years or so ago, when I was a little girl who attended Sunday School every Sabbath Day, I was taught to recite the Twenty-Third Psalm. Before I learned it by heart, however, an attempt was made to teach me its meaning.

While the words came from the Bible, the book used was an illustrated Bible Stories. It pictured a young-looking bearded shepherd; handsome, he was, wearing flowing robes draped in folds to his ankles. On his feet were sandals.

The picture showed the green pastures dotted with white lambs peacefully grazing near a meandering stream, and the shepherd with his sheep's crook tending the flock.

The lesson, as it was taught to our small class of five or six little girls, was clear enough. Our heavenly Father was responsible for the safety of the lambs, of the fine and virtuous-looking shepherd wearing sandals, and of us as well.

The Psalm was explained to us, sentence by sentence: just as the shepherd cares for the lambs, the Lord cares for people. Just as the shepherd finds green pastures where his lambs may rest without fear of lions, He provides a safe haven for us to sleep without fear of harm.

Just as the shepherd finds cool still pools for the lambs, He made the Earth yield clean potable water for us.

When we came to the next line, I found myself wondering why a man's soul should need restoration, for the trials and tribulations of life hadn't made any dent in the soul of the child that was I. The gentle lady who explained the Psalm tried her best to impart that life's vicissitudes sometimes tried men's souls.

It was quite acceptable to be assured the Paths of Righteousness were the proper trails to follow for this reinforced the lessons we learned at home: Right vs. Wrong, Truth vs. Lies, Generosity and Sharing vs. Selfishness and Being a Pig.

Getting across the idea of being Good in the name of the Lord was not the easiest part of the lesson though, because up 'til then it had seemed to me I was expected to be Good in the name of my father and mother. The Wrath of God wasn't what I feared at all. When I misbehaved, it was Parental Wrath that descended.

But I went along with the notion since it was expected.

Where we -- the teacher and I -- began to experience a Communication Gap was when it came to the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I knew what a valley was. It was a beautiful place between two high hills, between two mountains, perhaps, and -- always -- there flowed through the lowest part, a lovely river, a brook, a stream like the one in the Bible Story picture.

What, I wondered, could be threatening about this idyllic scene? What was fearsome about a valley?

Death, too, I knew about. Skid, our dog, had died. Flies died every summer's day, buzzing their lives away, firmly entangled in the sticky coils of flypaper hanging from the kitchen ceiling.

Ants died when you stepped on them; moths died when they flew into an open flame of a kerosene lamp or a candle. Butterflies died when my brother caught them in his net and carefully placed them in a tightly capped jar with a bit of cotton soaked with chloroform. Fish died when hooked and brought into the air.

Chickens died when Grampa caught them and chopped off their heads; they ran headless, with blood spurting from their necks, around the yard for a few minutes; then they died. We ate them for Sunday dinner.

Even people died. I had heard my parents speak in solemn tones and hushed voices about the death of people. That was a serious matter. No one got upset about death except when people died.

It was only when the Sunday School teacher related death to people that fear of death became comprehensible to me. At home, when a person died, my parent seemed sad, but I hadn't realized they might be afraid.

I couldn't see quite how the Lord's rod and staff might console anyone. S'pose, I thought, the Lord died; what then? Later I was to learn the Lord Jesus did die. And was further confused.

Then we came to the most difficult part of all. The Lord, teacher said, preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. I'd earlier been taught I was supposed to Love my Enemies. How strange! What sort of behavior was this on the part of the Lord?

More troubling still, the Lord anointed my head with oil. No thank you. My cup runneth over? Wouldn't that be messy? When I over-filled my milk cup and spilled on the table, my mother was annoyed. Teacher was not up to making this part of the lesson clear.

I like the last verse: surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. The idea of leaving home and living in the church didn't appeal especially, but it was nice to know that goodness and mercy would follow me as long as I lived.

Over the intervening years I've come to appreciate the Twenty-Third Psalm far more than when I was a child.

The Psalms are songs, and this psalm is, perhaps, the most beautiful and hopeful of them all. It's comforting to be assured there's a caring heavenly Father who is concerned when troubles beset us.

There's still one unforgettable thing about the picture in the book we learned from. The young man who wore on his feet a pair of sandals remains clear in memory.

It was those sandals that caught my attention and made an indelible impression on my mind. I hadn't yet learned it was sinful to covet, and I coveted those sandals. My own footgear was sensible ankle-high leather shoes, laced to the top and firmly double-knotted to prevent trips and falls.

Instead, wouldn't it be grand to wear sandals on my feet?

And now, all summer long, I do. And it is grand. And each time I slip into them, I think of the Twenty-Third Psalm!

Sunday School lessons have their place and teaching children the meaning of passages from the Bible can help reinforce the lessons of right and wrong children learn from their parents -- all as it should be.

What sometimes astonishes me is the other things children learn, the things they remember, even after half-a-century has passed, that neither child nor teacher realized was part of the on-going process.

So much of education is of this unexpected sort; children soaking up extraneous information, gaining knowledge not intended to be imparted, putting their own emphases and interpretations upon a lesson meant to include only certain abstract ideas or particular concrete facts.

When we deal with the thirsty sponges that are the minds of children, we scarcely understand what effects we create and the possible long-term results.