

Landscapes of Faith
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Session 2. Valley
Psalm 23, I Samuel 17, Ezekiel 37

Several years ago I attended a PC(USA) conference in Estes Park, Colorado, a popular tourist destination in the majestic Rocky Mountains. From the conference center, tucked into a lush green valley, we had a 360-degree view of the peaks, as idyllic as any gift-shop postcard. My husband and I did our share of hiking on those mountains, and even ventured above the timberline a couple of times, a major accomplishment for a confirmed flatlander who grew up in the sprawling metropolis of Houston (which is famously lacking any topography to speak of).

While I reveled in the experience of being on the mountain, many of the trails seemed just like any other hike—canopied by trees, with places of incline and decline, it was easy to forget where I was. It was only by standing in the valley, squinting up at the blue sky and jagged peaks, that I sensed the sheer size and splendor of the mountains around us.

In this article we consider the *valley* as a setting for numerous biblical stories. The word “valley” in scripture is sometimes used to describe any flat place or meadow, but frequently describes a place tucked between rolling hills or peaks. Though the valley provides an ideal vantage point for gazing upon the surrounding mountains—where God often appeared in grand theophanies in scripture—the valley is a potent spiritual symbol in its own right.

In contrast with a flat plain that seems to go on forever into a distant horizon, in valleys we have a sense of being cradled, hemmed in on all sides. We remember from elementary earth science that many valleys formed due to erosion, so there may be rivers or lakes present in the valley. Consequently, these parcels of land are often verdant and lush. The “green pastures and still waters” of Psalm 23 come to mind. The 23rd is our most beloved psalm, and for good reason—we are comforted to think of God walking with us and leading us in such a peaceful, pastoral setting.

A Place of Darkness

But all is not peaceful in the valley of Psalm 23. Translations vary slightly, from the “valley of the shadow of death” of the King James Version, to the “darkest valley” of the NRSV, to the very specific “Death Valley” in Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*. This is no pleasant fertile paradise with a pool of clear water as still as glass. Here there is darkness, danger, anxiety, and fear.

Where did all this darkness come from? Of course the dark valley is a metaphor; in contrast with our “mountaintop” experiences of God, we can often find ourselves in a desolate valley where God seems to be absent. But consider as well the layout of an actual, geological valley: the mountains, the very peaks that give the valley its boundaries, are what cast a shadow over the land, shrouding it in darkness. The days seem shorter in the valley, as the sun takes longer to rise over the eastern peaks and disappears more quickly over the western ones, making a valley a true place of shadow.

A friend of mine who grew up in a “holler” in Kentucky has said that with mountains on all sides, the sky always felt very far away. The surrounding peaks created an optical illusion of being dug down into the ground. In ancient cosmology, closeness to the heavens meant closeness to God. No wonder,

then, that the psalmist clung to the good news that God is also present in the valley, as a shepherd looking after the sheep.

A Place of Danger

The valley is also a place of vulnerability. There is no easy escape from low ground, whether the threat comes from flash floods or a hostile army. The high ground is preferable for the purposes of visibility and ease of movement.

In the story of David and Goliath, the two armies position themselves on opposite mountains. According to I Samuel 17:3, the Philistines “stood on the mountain on one side and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them.” From the side of the mountain, Goliath bellows out his intimidation, and the effect must have been terrifying for the Israelite army.

The armies meet in the middle and clash, and it is here that David hears Goliath’s taunting challenge for the first time. And it is here, in the valley, that David defeats Goliath. He is equipped not with elaborate fighting ability, superior armor, or the better tactical position, but with five smooth stones, a slingshot, and confidence in the living God who is not sequestered on the mountain, but who walks even “in the valley of the shadow of death.”

A Place for Renewal

Despite often being a place of shadow and danger, the valley also holds potential for renewal. One of the most potent examples of new life for Israel comes in the vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37. God sets Ezekiel down in a valley teeming with dusty, desiccated bones. God offers no explanation for the presence of these bones, but nothing short of a mass slaughter would have created such carnage. It is Death Valley, indeed.

The beauty of Ezekiel 37 is in the hearing. Imagine the sound of Ezekiel’s voice prophesying to the bones, his words reverberating off the mountains surrounding that valley and returning to his own ears, spurring him on. Imagine also the rattling of those bones as they slam into each other. The crashing cacophony of life resounds in that valley, and we hear it still in the rebirth that comes even in the valleys of our lives, echoing through the ages.

Study Guide

Questions and Activities

Before reading the scriptures, ask the group:

What comes to mind when you hear the word “valley”?

What are some images or experiences that surface?

Now, read one or more scripture passages addressed in the article (Psalm 23, I Samuel 17, Ezekiel 37:1-14) slowly and deliberately.

- How are the valleys in these stories similar to one another in your mind’s eye? How are they different?
- How did your initial images of “valley” change after hearing the scripture?
- In what way is a valley a metaphor for the spiritual life?

- We often talk about “mountaintop” experiences, in which God seems to be very close. How does our experience of God change when we are in the valley moments of our lives?
- What resources do you draw upon when God seems to be absent, or when danger or anxiety seems near? What spiritual practices or scriptures do you turn to?
- Have you experienced a sense of renewal in the midst of a “valley” time of your life? Talk about that experience.

Additional Activities

These are “mix and match” activities that could be combined and used in a retreat, workshop or other educational experience.

Where’s Your Valley?

Use an online image search to find pictures of different kinds of valleys. Print these pictures, each on its own sheet of paper. Have these images available on a table as participants enter, and invite them to choose an image of a valley that either appeals to them, describes their life (currently or in the past), or otherwise “calls” to them. As participants introduce themselves to one another (in small groups or to the whole group, depending on size and time), they are invited to simply show their image, and/or they may offer any thoughts about why they chose that image.

Go Low

We “hear” texts differently when we read them in different locales. There’s probably not a true valley available in which to have your gathering! However, you might experiment with meeting in a metaphorical “valley” to see how the group engages the topic differently—in a slightly darkened room, or maybe even down in the church basement!

Valley of Decision

In Joel 3, the prophet describes the “Valley of Decision” – the place where God’s judgment falls upon the nations “on account of my people” (v. 2):

Multitudes, multitudes,
 in the valley of decision!
 For the day of the Lord is near
 in the valley of decision.
 The sun and the moon are darkened,
 and the stars withdraw their shining... (v. 14-15)

On that day
 the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
 the hills shall flow with milk,
 and all the stream beds of Judah
 shall flow with water;
 a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord
 and water the Wadi Shittim. (v. 18)

Note: A “wadi” is another word for “valley” and is often used to describe a dry creek bed that fills with water during the rainy season.

In what way is the valley in this passage a comforting image? A disturbing one?

Sculpt the Valley

Give each participant an ample amount of clay, or a piece of paper with a variety of drawing materials. While the leader reads one or more of the scriptures, have people “play” with the art supplies. The focus is not on a product, or on “illustrating” what is happening in the passage, but on process, on getting “out of our heads,” and on letting one’s hands work with the materials in whatever ways are suggested by the hearing of the text.

(For more reluctant groups, it may be important to stress that these creations need not be shared or explained to the rest of the group.)

Sing the Valley

Several traditional hymns use the valley as an image for the spiritual life:

Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley

The Lily of the Valley

There’ll be No Dark Valley

The Valley of Blessing

Follow On

All (and more) are available via online hymn directories.

Make copies of the lyrics of some of these songs, and pass them out to participants (individually or in groups). Give them some time to engage these questions:

- Ask them to describe in their own words the valley being portrayed in the hymn. Perhaps they have experienced a real-life valley that comes to mind when they read the words of the hymn.
- Which scriptures come to mind? (The scriptures may or may not contain valley images specifically.)
- Imagine the kinds of experiences that might have inspired the hymn-writer to pen this particular hymn. It’s OK to reverently speculate!
- Describe a worship service that might utilize this hymn. What would the major themes of the service be?

Another song that contains themes of valley and God’s absence is “Endless Night,” from the Broadway show *The Lion King*. The song can be downloaded from iTunes or other online music sites. Though it does not specifically utilize the image of valley, it speaks to the fear or loneliness we sometimes associate with the “valley” experiences of our lives. Make sure to listen for the voices of the chorus near the end of the song, singing of the promise of a new day—which the soloist picks up and sings with greater and greater conviction.