

Easter 4

April 24, 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church

Psalm 23 "God With Us"

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It was a cold winter's evening in Northern Illinois. I had stayed late after school to finish a project. I was walking home the usual way--through an ancient cemetery near the heart of our small town. I knew it well. My best friend and I had searched it often, wondering why the limestone markers were so badly eroded that they were barely legible.

But the most curious thing was the dates. Everyone--men, women and children--whole families--had died in the same year:1918. Why? What had happened to them? We asked our parents and learned it was the Spanish flu.

There were no gates or walls, just a sidewalk that cut diagonally through the cemetery. It was the shortest way home and I was accustomed to taking it-- in daylight. Though distant streetlights were on, it was quite dark. It was a spooky place even for a ten year old. All those people, I thought, whole families--just wiped out, now long dead. Prickles rose up on my arms and spine. I admit it, I was frightened.

It was then that the words came to me: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for the Lord is with me." I needed to be reminded of that: God was with me. I was not alone. Those words came to mind at just the right time. I repeated them to myself like a mantra, over and over again, until I reached the end of that long sidewalk.

Comfort. The words of the psalmist comforted me as I walked through that valley of the shadow of death. It was not the first time I needed comfort. My mother had died two years earlier, but I did not know this psalm at the time. There was no comfort from my stern, stoic German grandparents. I had felt totally alone at that time.

As I reflect on what had changed, I realize that though my adoptive parents also had no awareness of what I needed and no ability to comfort me, they did the one thing that made all the difference. They brought me to church: Grace Episcopal Church in Galena, Illinois. It was there that I went to Sunday School, learned Scripture, and listened intently to the preaching. It was there that I received comfort.

When have you walked through the valley of the shadow of death? That valley can have many shapes. The longer we live, the more times we find ourselves walking there. Was it when you lost your parents, your siblings, your best friend, your child or your spouse? Perhaps you lost a relationship with someone for whom you cared deeply. We can find ourselves walking that valley any time we feel alone or utterly abandoned. It can happen at a time of divorce, a betrayal by a colleague or even a friend.

This psalmist speaks intimately to the poet in me. Yet far more significantly; he speaks to my soul. I'm fairly certain that he speaks similarly to you as well. I say this because I have looked out at the faces of the bereaved at countless funerals and I have walked the long journey with them in various cemeteries, accompanying them to the gravesite in many a funeral procession. Has this psalm impacted your life?

If we examine it psalm closely, we begin to discover what it is that gives it such enduring power over thousands of years. And here we find something very startling. Its essence is contained at the very center of this poem!

There is something very curious about this psalm. The number of words in the original Old Testament (that is, the Hebrew text) leading up to that central statement: the words, "for you are with me" is twenty-six. And if you count backwards from the end of the psalm towards the central expression, the number of words is also twenty-six! The words "for you are with me" appear at precisely the center of the psalm!

I have no doubt that the writer of this psalm was using this centering technique to emphasize these words which are the very heart of what the psalmist is saying. The number twenty-six is itself of interest because the numerical value of the letters in the word YHWH (Yahweh, the name for God) is $10 + 5 + 6 + 5 = 26$. YAWEH, the Lord God Almighty is at the center of this psalm!

The idea that the Lord is "with" someone occurs frequently in the Bible. For example, the Lord appeared to Isaac in the night and said, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you." (Gen. 26:24). Genesis 39 tells how the Lord was "with" Joseph in Egypt (vs. 2, 3, 21. & 23). When a frightened Gideon was threshing wheat, hiding in a pit for the wine press, an angel appeared to him, and said, "the Lord is with you, mighty warrior." And when Paul was

fearful about continuing his missionary work, the Lord said to him in a dream, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you or harm you." (Acts 18:9-10). Finally we can recall the power of the preposition "with" in the name of Jesus, "and they shall name him 'Emmanuel,' which means 'God is with us.' " (Mt. 1:23); (see also the words to Mary in Luke 1:28).

In the first portion of this psalm, there is a revelation of the writer's intimate relationship with God. As it begins with "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," we clearly hear that all of his needs are met by this 'Shepherd Lord.' Everything that is needed is being provided. "He makes me lie down in green pastures," (He gives me needed rest). "He leads me beside still waters." What a soothing image this is! Respite from whatever is troubling; it is a vision of complete peace. "He revives my soul." Our souls do need revival when we feel that we are alone. Just being outdoors in God's Good Creation is life giving. "He leads me in right paths. We have been given the Commandments. All we need to do is follow them.

Remember that God knows how hard this is for us. Why should we follow them? Because they are both God's command and God's gift to us. The Writer is telling us that it is his intimate relationship with Yahweh which makes all his difficulties bearable.

At the center of the psalm we encounter a foreshadowing of the One who is to come, the One whose very name means "God with us" Emmanuel. Even though he walks "through the valley of the shadow of death," the psalmist need "fear no evil," for his 'Shepherd Lord' is with him. The Shepherd's rod and staff will comfort him. This is an interesting image and it helps us to know that the "rod" refers to the short wooden club that the shepherd would use as protection against animal or human enemies. The "staff" was longer and could be used to help sheep struggling up a difficult path or through whatever darkness and wilderness they must pass.

The second half of the psalm shifts to another picture. Now the Lord is a gracious host, carefully preparing a marvelous meal. Though there are enemies in the vicinity, the guest enjoys the host's hospitality and protection. The host Lot once extended hospitality to strangers, saying to those who would harm them, "Do nothing to these men, as they have come under the shelter of the my roof." (Gen.19:8). Judges (19:23)

speaks of a host's responsibility towards a guest and Sirach also provides a picture of the sort of hospitality a good host provides.(32:1-2)

The psalms often speak of enemies in pursuit of the psalmist : In Psalm 7: " let them pursue and overtake me." (Ps. 7:5; and also Ps. 71:11). In the 23rd Psalm however, it is goodness and mercy that will chase after the psalmist for a lifetime--and yes, even beyond.

As you and I are still experiencing a worldwide pandemic, of proportions unimagined by those suffering and dying of the Spanish flu, we have lost so much. We have lost loved ones and friends, and yet some of us have survived Covid 19. Still we continue to mourn the hundreds of thousands of complete strangers who have lost their lives. Still we grieve for those who continue to die each day.

Yet you and I have homes to shelter us and food enough to eat. We are not in want. Countless numbers have lost their employment and are food insecure. It is unknown how many who live alone are still in isolation are suffering from depression have health and material needs. How many homes are scenes of domestic violence? How many homeless--including children --suffer still? Yes, the Lord is with them. You and I know this. But do THEY know that the Lord is with them? Many do not yet know the Living Lord.

You and I continue to experience God's goodness and mercy in the midst of this time of great suffering. We are finally able to share our joy as we worship in person again. Though masked, we can now see each other's smiling eyes. We can speak in person with one another. We can invite people to worship, we can welcome the stranger. Give thanks to the Holy One! Give thanks to the Risen Lord! Give thanks that we are able to receive forgiveness for our sins in the celebration of the Eucharist. We can rejoice in the banquet our gracious Host provides for us. We are those who live daily into hope of the Feast that has no end.

Our Good Shepherd seeks out the lost sheep, welcomes the stranger. We, too, are called to carry this hope into the world. We can do no less than this: Give thanks to the Risen Lord, give thanks to Emmanuel, "God with us."

Amen