

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

The Reverend Mark S. Merrill

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Our Constant Companion

Psalm 23 & Acts 9:36-43

The 23rd Psalm is one of the first scripture passages many of us learned as children. We have said it in time of need – personal, family, communal, national - as we sought solace and strength. We have heard it at countless funerals. The words wrap around us like a favorite sweater, afghan or comforter. They are words of deep faith and wise perspective on life. They are words that so many live out on their faith journeys, as these words also shape those faith journeys.

Because of his life experiences as a shepherd and that he was known as a writer of psalms, King David of the Old Testament is usually considered the author of these words. There is every indication in the Psalm that David is looking back, not just on the time in his life when he was a shepherd, but on the whole of his life. He can say that God has been with him throughout his life. Just as David had been a faithful shepherd of his family's flocks, taking care of the every need of the sheep, so God has been his shepherd – keeping him safe, leading him on right paths, helping him find food and drink, sustaining him when his life journey took him through desolate and menacing valleys.

He has known God as refuge, rock and supporting arms. He has experienced God's protective and providing care. Whatever has happened, including situations of threat and crisis, God's companionship presence has always been there. As Dr. Patrick Miller has written, "...God will always exercise personal care, giving both provision for life and protecting support."

Rabbi Harold Kushner has written:

At the center of this psalm is the statement 'for you are with me'. The number of words leading up to the expression in the Hebrew version of the Old Testament is 26. If one counts back from the end of the psalm toward this expression, the number of words is also 26. The words 'for you are with me' appear precisely in the middle of the psalm. Was the writer of the psalm using this centering technique to emphasize these words, which are at the heart of what the psalm has to say?

(The number 26 is itself of interest because the numerical value of the Hebrew letters in the word YHWH [Yahweh, the name for God] is $10 + 5+6+5 = 26$.) In any case, the notion that the Lord is 'with' someone occurs frequently at crucial points in the Bible.

"You are with me" is also at the very heart of the Gospel, for in Matthew 1:23 Jesus is referred to as "Emmanuel", which means, "God is with us."

Even though we believe this, there can be times when we are doubtful, for life can have many 'Even thoughts' and 'Darkest valleys. In his wonderful little book on this Psalm, Scott Sullender has written the following on these two phrases:

‘Even though...’ Faith has an in spite of’ quality to it. In spite of doubt, I believe. In spite of fear, I trust. In spite of suffering, I hope. In spite of hardship, I grow stronger. In spite of hurt, I continue to love. In spite of anger, I forgive. In this sense, faith is like courage. ‘Even though I walk through the valley...I fear not...’

Even though I suffer,
Even though life is difficult,
Even though I have been wronged,
Even though I die,
Even though...I fear not, for you are with me.

His next words are on the phrase: ‘the valley of...’ The literal translation of this is ‘valley of deep darkness.’ The inference of ‘death’ is unmistakable, though. This is a place of danger, a dangerous valley, with a winding and narrowing path...mountainous terrain on each side...with threatening clouds lingering over the peaks...large rocks and trees up each hillside...and perhaps a wolf or a cougar lurking behind some of the rocks...and down through the center of this valley travels a helpless band of sheep, and their fearless shepherd.

‘Valley’ can be interpreted more symbolically...as any dangerous or difficult passage in our lives. Danger comes in many forms. Death, certainly....Perhaps we have repeated this psalm to ourselves before we entered surgery, when Mom or Dad died, or when the airplane passed through turbulent weather. Yet there are other kinds of ‘shadows’ and other kinds of dangers, some perhaps more dreadful to us than death. What experiences in life are just as frightening...just as ‘deadly’...just as much a dangerous passage?

Valley of the shadow of ...failure
Valley of the shadow of...rejection
Valley of the shadow of...physical disability
Valley of the shadow of ... temptation
Valley of the shadow of ... addiction
Valley of the shadow of...I fear not, for you are with me.

We are aware that we are not kept from sorrow, crisis, tragedy, and the horrors of life. As these have been experienced, many have cried out, “Where was God? How could a loving God let this happen?” And we think of the victims, their families, and the survivors at Virginia Tech, in Darfur and Somalia, in Iraq, at the World Trade Center; and those of hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, tsunamis, crime, terrorism, slavery, and these other Valleys of the Shadow. And our faith is stretched and challenged. Through whatever happens, I believe that God is with us throughout all, weeping with us, holding us in the palm of God’s hand as those precious, known, and dear to God.

Leslie Brandt reminds us that:

There will be storms in your life – this Jesus promises. There will be pain and sorrow – this is as unavoidable with you as it was with Christ when He was in this world. There will never, however, be a moment when God ceases to care about you. Whereas God does not shield you from all the storms that come your way, God assures you that God is with you in the midst of these storms. Your God loves so deeply that God feels the hurt and the

pain that afflict the lives of the children of God. God will grant the courage and strength to face and to overcome those hurts and pains.

Again, Rabbi Harold Kushner has written:

The role of God is not to explain and not to justify but to comfort, to find people when they are living in darkness, take them by the hand, and show them how to find their way into sunlight again.

I am convinced that God uses us as one way to live out this role of God, for we are the hands and feet of God. As family and/or friends you have been there for one another & for others – phone calls, e-mails, cards, visits, food provided, practical services rendered, prayers, hugs, a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear; as well as services, support and outreach within this congregation and beyond. In so doing you replenish the love, strength and faith of the one or those in need.

Today another ministry unfolds here at Westminster to remind us of and to live out the words, “for you are with me.” We are beginning a Parish Nurse ministry, and commissioning Judy Ridinger in this role. Parish Nursing is a health promotion, disease prevention ministry based on the care of the whole person. This ministry will focus on “advocacy for the members in the area of personal health issues including assessment of personal situations and providing support to help individuals and families make decisions about their health; and the promotion of physical and spiritual health through education.”

“A Parish Nurse is a link between faith and health, helping people connect what they believe with life choices. The call of the Parish Nurse is to walk with people through the transitions of life, help people grow spiritually and find language of hope in the midst of these transitions. The goal of parish nursing is to allow God to touch another person through you, to put the person being cared for in a position to be conscious of the presence of God in his/her life and current situation (www.pcusa.org/nationalhealth).”

The Parish Nursing program is another way for this congregation to live out the following insights from Psalm 23:

God shows unconditional love for us, especially in times of danger and loneliness. We do not bring God into the situation, into the narrows of life; God is already there, ministering to God’s people. We meet God there. ... We are eternally in the hands of a Christ-like God.

God never leaves us alone. Never. This theme is repeated throughout the scriptures. Again and again and again. God is not a fair-weather friend. God is there with us through thick and thin, the good times...and the difficult times.

People have said, ‘God, I never could have made it through the valley and into the sunlight without Your help and support, without the people You inspired to reach out to me, without the courage and resiliency You planted in me.’ God’s promise was that when we had to face the pain and unfairness of the world as we inevitably would, we would not have to face it alone, for God would be with us.

When the psalmist writes, 'I will fear no evil for Thou art with me,' he is not only saying, I can handle this because I am not alone. He is saying, I can handle this because God is with me and not on the side of the illness or accident.

God is the one who is with us when we are tempted to feel that the world has abandoned us. God is the one who is with us when we feel alone in the valley of the shadow." It means that even if I experience the deepest darkness imaginable, there is no need to be afraid, because God promises to be with me, to protect me to comfort me, and to make me secure.

As David was a shepherd caring for and meeting the everyday needs of each of his sheep, so have you been 'shepherds' to others in time of crisis and need. You have been there so that the others will not have felt alone. You have been the embodied presence of Jesus the Christ, our Good Shepherd, our Constant Companion. As you continue in these ministries of compassion and as Judy begins her ministry as Parish Nurse, may you hear the following words as charge, challenge and reminder.

A Marty Haugen has written hymn #2213 in *Sing the Faith* – "Healer of Our Every Ill"

The refrain is:

Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.

The verses are:

You who know our fears and sadness, grace us with your peace and gladness;
Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts.

In the pain and joy beholding how your grace is still unfolding, give us all your vision,
God of love.

Give us strength to love each other, every sister, every brother; Spirit of all kindness, be
our guide.

You who know each thought and feeling, teach us all your way of healing;
Spirit of compassion, fill each heart.

Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.