

WALKING THROUGH

[1] The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

[2] He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

[3] He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

[4] Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

[5] Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

[6] Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

(Psalm 23, King James Version)

Has it really been two years? Two years since our hearts were broken by a hatred so deep we could not have imagined it possible? So much has changed in these past two years. So much that we once took for granted now seems like a lifetime ago.

Of course, we still enjoy the comforts of routine: watching the Yankees and the Red Sox duel for first place in the A.L. east just as they have for decades; sending our children back to school, just like we do after every Labor Day weekend; hopping the train to Manhattan, as people have done for generations.

But even with these routines continuing all around us, it doesn't take much to remind us that things are different;

that life seems more tenuous; that we feel more vulnerable. The armed soldiers in Penn Station and LaGuardia remind us we need protection. We sing “God Bless America” during the 7th inning stretch at Shea, and hear the lyrics in a whole new light. Completing a drive through a tunnel or across a bridge brings a sense of relief that we never knew before. And many of our homes have bottled water, duct tape, plastic sheeting, and batteries in an effort to ease our minds.

Yes, our world has changed. But when we come to church, we’re reminded that some things are eternal. Despite what’s going on in our lives and in our world, some words still ring just as true today as they did thousands of years ago: words such as, “In the beginning God created...”; “Blessed are the peacemakers...”; and “For God so loved the world...” And then we have the warm and comforting words from today’s scripture lesson that say, “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.” While David’s words in the 23rd Psalm describe his own faith, they reflect our faith as well. The Lord is *our* Shepherd, we shall not want. Since David had worked as a shepherd himself, he could think of no more comforting image for God than that of a shepherd. The shepherd takes care of the sheep’s every need. When the sheep need food, the shepherd brings them to green pastures. When the sheep need water, the shepherd leads them to quiet, still waters. When a sheep is in danger, the shepherd reaches out with his staff and pulls the animal to safety. If a wolf threatens the flock, the shepherd fights it off with his sturdy staff. Whatever the sheep need, the shepherd is there to provide. As far as the sheep are concerned, nothing can separate them from their shepherd. And while this is not always the case with an earthly shepherd, it is none the less true of our heavenly Shepherd. Nothing on this earth can separate us from God.

In the Book of Romans the Apostle Paul wrote, “Who shall separate us from the love of God? Shall

tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God” (8:35-38). And so we ask today, what can separate us from the love of God? Can a terrorist attack or cancer, can a war or a car wreck, can the loss of a limb or the loss of a job? No. Paul assures us that absolutely nothing can separate us from God’s love. God’s grace and love are available to us every single day of our lives. And when our time on this earth is finished, even then we are not separated from God. We dwell forever with our heavenly Shepherd. We dwell with our Shepherd in the here and now. And we dwell together in the life everlasting.

Those who have already gone to be with God are not the ones who are suffering. It is those of us left behind, still in that day-to-day struggle that suffer. We suffer sadness over the loss of a loved one. We suffer an empty spot in our homes and our hearts because someone we love is missing. We are the ones who suffer the emptiness and grief, the painful memories and tears, the ache that will not go away. But our faith is here to tell us that our loved ones are now in the presence of God, where the Book of Revelation promises us every tear is wiped away.

This promise is a comfort, but not a cure all. It cannot erase our pain. And so we ask ourselves, and we ask God, what can we do when we find ourselves in that place that the psalmist described as, “the valley of the shadow of death?” Sometimes we feel like we’ll never find our way out. And when we feel this way, these words in the 23rd Psalm are just what we need to hear. They’re a gift.

The psalmist wrote, “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” He didn’t stay in the valley. He walked through it. I believe that this holds just as true for those of here today. We’ll get through it—through the grief, through the fear, through this life into the next. And when we feel trapped, our faith whispers to us to keep walking, keep putting one foot in front of the other, following whatever small amount of light we can find. No matter what’s going on in our lives and in our world, we are not abandoned in that valley. We are called to walk through it.

This isn’t always easy. As the threat of violence continues to hang heavy on the horizon, walking through the valley has been difficult. As other terrorist attacks have taken place in Iraq and Israel, walking through has been difficult. As friends and family members live with illness, hardship, or heartbreak, walking through has been difficult. As we face another anniversary of the attacks, when many of the old feelings return, walking through the valley becomes difficult.

When walking is difficult, let us draw strength from the promise that God walks with us. That nothing can separate us from the loving presence of God. That neither David nor we walk alone. Many of you know the beloved song, “You’ll Never Walk Alone” from the musical, *Carousel*. The song was written in 1945 when WW II raged in Europe and fear and sadness gripped America. Listen to these lyrics that encourage us now, just as they did back in the war years of the 1940’s.

*When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark.
At the end of the storm
Is a golden sky*

And the sweet silver song of a lark.

Walk on through the wind.

Walk on through the rain,

Tho' your dreams be tossed and blown.

Walk on, walk on

With hope in your heart

And you'll never walk alone.

You'll never walk alone.

When I hear these lyrics, I can't help but think of the 23rd Psalm. And when I read it, I'm reminded that we walk in God's presence, as well as in the presence of one another. As a family of faith, we walk together—supporting and encouraging one another. We are Christ's hands. When someone in our family needs help, we're here to provide it. And when we need help ourselves, we know where we can find it.

Even though the 23rd Psalm describes walking through the dark valley, David ends his Psalm with a bold statement of faith writing, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." Where is the goodness and mercy when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death? If we look closely enough we'll still see it. In the wake of September 11, 2001 New Yorkers saw an outpouring of goodness and mercy from our fellow Americans who lined up to donate blood, from those who cooked food and delivered it to families awaiting news, from those who gave generously to relief efforts, and from people who lit candles at prayer services all around the world as a show of support. In the face of the worst day many of us have known, kind people showed that love is stronger than hate and goodness stronger than evil. We were followed by goodness and mercy.

In the last line of the psalm, David declares, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” In the midst of the valley, these familiar words declare hope, faith, and trust in the living God. This shepherd who lived thousands of years ago in a land thousands of miles away, reminds us that we all know sadness, fear, and loss. But we also know what’s on the other side—the house of the Lord. We may not know what tomorrow holds, but by faith we know who holds tomorrow—our divine Shepherd who leads us to green pastures and still waters, the Shepherd who restoreth our souls. AMEN.

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September 11th Memorial Sunday

September 7, 2003

The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, in times of trouble and distress, our souls find comfort and courage in your loving presence. Remind us that nothing in this world, not the worst scenario imaginable can separate us from your love and grace. For those of us walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we ask your continued support. Help us not to get stuck or lost in this shadowy place, but to search for whatever light you provide. And then with our eyes fixed on you, bring us through these difficulties to a brighter tomorrow on the other side. Draw us forward with the promise that if we look closely enough, some goodness and mercy will be found from those people who walk through the valley with us. And keep us moving in the hope that we shall one day dwell in your Heavenly home forever and ever.

We remember this day all those who suffer sadness and loss over the September 11th anniversary. Comfort them we pray. For those places in the world where violence persists, in Iraq and Israel and in places we never hear about, help people work together to establish a just peace.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.