

## **“Through the Valley of Dark Shadows”**

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Today I wrapping up a series of sermons on fear, based on II TIMOTHY 1:7, “*God has not given us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-control.*”

Although it hadn't crossed my mind until this week, it seems appropriate to conclude the series on the last Sunday of the liturgical year. The church's new year begins with Advent next Sunday. Advent and Christmas: the most stressful time of year for a large population of Americans. And what better Scripture to use than...

(PSALMS 23 NRSV) A Psalm of David

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;

for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.

I don't remember this; but my mother used to tell a story about when I was five and Granny was spending a few days with us after the birth of my sister. Came bedtime, I wanted to sleep with “Granny”, but for some reason I don't recall, even though we were in the same room, I couldn't sleep in the same bed as she.

Even though I had slept in a bed by myself every night of my life, apparently I pulled the old, “scared of the dark” routine, to try to get into bed with “Granny”, but it didn't work. She just said, “You're not alone. God's with you.”

To which I replied, after a pause, she said, “...but I want to feel some skin.”

I was a little distressed some time ago when, during a Children's Sermon I asked, “What are you afraid of?” and every one of them said, “Nothing.” That troubles me. You don't believe that, do you? What kind of pressure would a five-year-

old experience that would lead him/her to say, "I'm not afraid of anything"? Peer pressure? Already at five? Social pressure? Is it the advertising logo on all the baseball caps and T-shirts and the back windows of pickup trucks: "No Fear?"

Or is it that they were in church, and you're not supposed to admit, in church, that sometimes you're afraid?

When he was five years old, our youngest son, Colin, was afraid of almost everything: clowns, balloons, Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny (or, for that matter, any of those big, fuzzy costumed animals like you see at Disneyland.) When he was three, he entered the hospital to have tubes put in his ears. Everything was fine. He was playing down the hall in the game room, when suddenly he ran back to his room with a look of panic on his face and crawled under his bed. We looked out in the hall, and here came a clown with a bunch of balloons. Yep; same Colin. He was ready to go home! He stayed in his mother's lap, snuggled as close as he could get to her. He wanted to "feel some skin."

When the psalmist writes, "I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me", was he just "whistling in the dark", or had he found a way to "feel some skin?"

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley;" literally, "...the valley of dark shadows". Not death, but questions and uncertainties of life. Given the shepherding imagery of the Psalm, what fear would it address? Travelers in that day feared robbers and beasts of prey. A king might fear a military coup... Dark shadows—ones that come late in the day when the sun is low, and the light is fading...

Or, remember the story of David and Bathsheba: a sleazy affair, a botched cover-up attempt when she got pregnant, and the plot to get her husband killed on the battlefield... Maybe the dark shadows are guilt and the fear getting caught.

Or, maybe David wrote the psalm during the feebleness of his old age; fading eyesight; the fear of sitting isolated in an unknown world of silent confusion, drooling chin, palsied hand—a world of dark shadows in which death is welcome. Some of us are walking through that "valley of dark shadows" now, with our own parents. Some of us already have made that walk.

David writes, "Even though I walk through the Valley of Dark Shadows, I will fear no evil." If we're really honest, there are times when "for Thou art with me" simply doesn't do the trick. We need to "feel some skin." So, can this Psalm give us what we need to face the world with faith? Can we "fear no evil?"

I remember Myrtle Gragg, in Claremore, Oklahoma: an aging, retired Army Sgt. who met me at her door wearing a necklace of padlocks, after undoing eleven dead bolts on her front door. She had packed all her belongings into boxes, and stacked them to create a system of trenches throughout her house. These boxes surrounded her bed, her cook stove and her toilet.... In her fear she had fortified

her house as if against military attack.

In the movie, "As Good as it Gets", Jack Nicholson plays a character who walks the sidewalks of New York City, avoiding contact with other pedestrians, stutter-stepping and weaving in an awkward dance to avoid stepping on the lines and cracks of the sidewalks. When he got home each evening the first thing he did was go into the bathroom, unwrap a fresh bar of antiseptic soap and wash his hands in scalding water, and then throw the bar of soap in the trash can and open a *second* bar, and wash his hands with it.

Myrtle Gragg was clinically paranoid, and Jack Nicholson's character was neurotic. It's terrible, going through life always looking over your shoulder—a thermometer in one pocket—a can of mace in the other.

Over 80 years ago FDR addressed this nation and said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear, itself. It's always fear that does a people in. That's why the New Testament insists, "Perfect love casts out fear" (I John 4:18 NRSV).

We need not be paranoid or neurotic to be paralyzed by unreasonable fear. Fear immobilizes us frequently, not so much by overestimating the evil around us; but by underestimating our ability, with God's help, to respond to it.

The Psalmist didn't have *that* kind of fear. He knew his abilities to respond. As a shepherd boy he'd faced the lion and the bear—and the Philistine giant, Goliath. As a military hero he'd faced the Philistine army; and as king he'd faced an attempted military coup from within his own household. David knew his abilities to respond; and he knew the source of his strength in times of danger: "Even though I walk through the valley of dark shadows, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

An unreasonable approach to fear is to expect a TOTAL absence of fear when we have faith. Because we pray, and still are afraid, we lose hope. Faith is not an absence of fear. I've said many times: faith is the decision to act on the basis of what I say I believe, even when I have doubts—and even if I'm afraid.

Still, faith doesn't come "ready to mix." You don't add water and stir, and the Psalmist knew that. That's why the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm doesn't begin, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of dark shadows, I will fear no evil." It begins with a walk with the shepherd: through green pastures, beside still waters. It begins with the shepherd "restoring my soul."

The refreshment beside still waters comes *before* the perilous journey through the valley. If you wait 'til you're in the valley, you're in trouble. You see, ours is not a "manipulative faith". We don't have magical incantations that manipulate nature and nature's God. Faith is not so much a life jacket as it is the ability to swim—learned and developed through years of practice and conditioning.

Faith isn't built in the valley of dark shadows; however, in the valley of dark

shadows, if we already have rested in green pastures and walked beside still waters with the One who "Restores my soul," we can have a faith upon which to call. And in that faith we can walk through the valley of dark shadows, and "fear no evil." Have you walked with the Shepherd today?