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Psalm 23

FEAR OF THE DARK

None of us likes feeling vulnerable. And that is probably why many of us feel uneasy with darkness. We can't see very well in the dark. We can't see what might harm us or what we might run into or trip over. I always feel a bit of uneasiness each evening when I take the dog out for her final chance to relieve herself before we all go to bed. It is dark out there in the backyard. And even the motion sensor light doesn't really illuminate very much. It gets me thinking about the ancient peoples of the Bible who lived in a time without electricity. Each day as the sun went down, they had only their little fires or small oil lamps to help them deal with the vast darkness of the night and its hidden dangers. How vulnerable they had to have felt.

In her book about creating family rituals, Gertrude Mueller Nelson tells the story of when her three year old son Peter began to be afraid of the dark. Peter had become fascinated with a particular picture from a book of paintings in the family's home. This particular painting depicted a dramatic boar hunt. The artist had painted a very fierce and frightening image of a boar foaming at the tusks with fiery red eyes. Peter was transfixed by this painting and would repeatedly seek it out to study it. Of course, it wasn't long before the boar became a night-time visitor in the Nelson household. Peter would wake up and call out to his parents: "The boar is here!" His mother recalls that "his fear was electric." Peter would describe the boar in great details to his parents. "He told us," she writes, "his boar was the same color as the night--he blended in so well into the darkness that getting up to go potty was a real hazard. You could walk right into this boar and not know it until it was too late." Peter's fear was so palpable and his description of the beast so vivid that Gertrude admitted that "the idea of this night-colored

boar made the hair stand up on *my* neck." When Peter would cry out in the night, Gertrude confessed that she ran down the hall to his bedroom "determined to save Peter but half-hoping not to slam into a great bristled body."

A lot of us remain afraid of the dark even into adulthood. It's just that for many of us, the fears we had as children of monsters and beasts in the darkness evolve into adult fears. And our darkness can come at any hour of the day or night. We are afraid of illness, injury, and death. We are afraid of financial hardships. We are afraid for our children's wellbeing. We are afraid of crime. We are afraid of failure. There are indeed real dangers, real dark valleys that come into our lives.

Psalms 23, one of the most beloved passages of scripture, speaks quite openly and frankly about the darkness we all experience in life. The writer speaks of having to go through dark valleys, of evil, of enemies, and hardships. Some of these are likely to have referred to external dangers: people or illnesses or life circumstances that may bring harm. But not all the darkness we face comes from outside of us. Some of the dark valleys the poet of this psalm may have been thinking about could likely have come from within us: overwhelming anger, debilitating fears, bitterness toward others that infects the heart, guilt and shame for our behaviors, selfish tendencies, or out-of-control behaviors. Just like the sheep referred to in the psalm, we don't always follow the pathways of the shepherd, and in our pain or loneliness or fear or anger or selfishness, we may run off in the wrong direction. We may run to the refrigerator, or to the liquor store, or to the shopping mall, or to the porn site and become lost in a dark and dangerous place.

When children are afraid of the dark there is a temptation for the parents to turn on all the lights and show them that there is nothing to be afraid of. See, it was just your *imagination!* But

that negates the inner reality of the children. Their fears are indeed real. The writer of Psalm 23 does not try to dismiss our fears by telling us they are not so bad or so real. The writer knows that there are indeed real dangers, real evil, real enemies at large in the world and within us. Instead of dismissing our fears, the writer of Psalm 23 turns to God and says: *you are with me*. "You are with me" is the central message of this entire psalm. You are with me.

What makes our darkness seem so hopeless, what enables the darkness to have such power, is the feeling of being utterly alone. I think about those 12 Thai boys in that dark, dark cave with their young soccer coach. The hope that we have for their long-term wellbeing may very well rest on the fact that they had each other. They were not alone in the dark. And then, they would learn that they had the prayers and the support of the entire world as they awaited rescue. Being alone in the dark brings despair and hopelessness. The central message of this psalm is that we are not alone. God is with us.

This is also the central message of Christianity: you are with me. In the birth of Jesus, Christians celebrate the coming of Emmanuel, which literally means, "God is with us." Jesus is God with us. We are not left alone to stumble around in the darkness. God comes to join us. It is the relationship with the God of love and grace and constancy that transforms people. God is not going away, no matter what we do, no matter how badly we stray. God's presence, a presence of compassion and love and forgiveness, is steadfast. And it is this presence that not only comforts us but also transforms us.

In today's reading from Mark, Jesus had compassion for the crowds "because they were like sheep without a shepherd." They were lost. And so Jesus becomes their shepherd, and begins to teach them so that they can find the way through life's dark valleys.

This is the hope everyone of us has as we inevitably face our own darkness. We are not alone. God is with us. The psalmist offers us words of hope for every darkness that comes into our lives.

When we face surgery or when the doctors give us that frightening diagnosis, we can trust what the psalmist tells us about God: *you are with me*.

When we are laid off or confronted with financial worries, we can trust what the psalmist tells us about God: *you are with me*.

When death visits our family and claims a beloved member of our household, we can trust what the psalmist tells us about God: *you are with me*.

When we are confronted with our own wrongdoing, when we are embarrassed or ashamed of ourselves, we can trust what the psalmist tells us about God: *you are with me*.

When our marriage unravels, when our children are struggling, when our friends betray us, we can trust what the psalmist tells us about God: *you are with me*.

When we are overwhelmed by life, when too much is asked of us, when we can't catch a break, we can trust what the psalmist tells us about God: *you are with me*.

When we feel God calling us to something new but are fearful of failure or rejection or looking foolish, we can trust what the psalmist tells us about God: *you are with me*.

God is with us, each one of us, and all of us collectively. For, Psalm 23 was not just directed toward individuals but toward a whole people. It offered a message of hope to the people of Israel in their collective hardships. And it still does for us today. In the face of this world's divisions and warfare and environmental crises, the hope we have is that God is with us. God isn't going anywhere. And this powerful presence, this powerful presence of love and forgiveness and compassion, is the force that can transform us and save us from ourselves.

Peter's parents didn't try to convince him that his fears about the boar were not real. Instead, when he would cry out in the night, they would go to his bedroom and ask Peter, "What shall we do with him, Peter?" And Peter would respond, "Frow him out da window!" Gertrude recalls that she and her husband "crawled under the bed, grabbed the boar by the scruff of the neck, hauled him out and dragged him to the window where we shoved him out and banished him for the night." And when the boar continued to make too many visits, Peter and his dad drew a large picture of the boar and took it behind the garage where they burned him. Peter's fears were not negated and they were not ignored. Instead, his parents offered a ministry of presence. They assured Peter that he did not face his fear alone. And then they created rituals where he was reminded that they were with him in facing the darkness.

That's exactly what we do here at church. We create rituals where we remind one another of the important message that God is with us. We recall that God is with us in our songs and in our prayers. At the communion table and at the baptismal font we carry out the ritual of remembering that God is with us. The very act of gathering in worship is a ritual of remembering that God is with us. We come to this place bearing the fears and darkneses of our lives and of our world, and we proclaim an affirmation of faith: Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.