



Psalm 23  
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones  
April 3, 2011  
“You Are With Me”

With armed conflict in Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq and Ivory Coast; with large scale earthquakes in New Zealand, Japan and Crete; with a devastating tsunami and fear of a nuclear meltdown; with the world economy teetering; anyone who does not feel at least a tinge of anxiety is not paying attention. The cover of a recent magazine sums it up well. It reads, “Tsunamis. Earthquakes. Nuclear Meltdowns. Revolutions. Economies on the Brink. What the #@%! Is Next?”<sup>1</sup>

The current deluge of disasters begs the question: How do people cope with catastrophe? The people of Japan have been hit, not by a one-two punch, but a one-two-three clobbering-earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster. And if we add to those three, contaminated food, lost jobs and psychological trauma, we wonder how the Japanese will endure the blows that life continues to inflict upon them.

What about here in North America? When suffering occurs half a world away, many of us feel grateful that we do not live in Japan, Libya or Afghanistan. Then, some of us feel guilty that we feel grateful. It doesn't seem right that someone else's pain should prompt gratitude within us.

Yet, no one escapes personal suffering. Each of us experiences grief. Not everyone encounters the same degree of suffering, but all of us must find ways to survive when our own personal world crumbles.

At this very moment, life is painful for many within our church family. Your loved one has died, you have lost your job and along with it, your self confidence, your marriage is on the rocks, your health is disintegrating, you are battling depression, you are feeling cut off and alone. Will the current calamity destroy you or will your faith carry you through your crisis? This morning we hear the words of one of the most comforting passages in all of Scripture.

For 3,000 years, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm has provided assurance for people in times of distress. Even today, when most have not lived in a rural setting and have never seen a shepherd, the imagery communicates a powerful message. God loves and cares for us as a shepherd cares for his sheep. This profound, yet simple psalm, describes the essence of God. God is loving and dependable. It declares that God is trustworthy and will be at our side, come what may.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm does not promise that God will keep you healthy and your children out of danger. It does not claim that God will give you a long life. It does not say that war or

earthquakes will never harm you. It does not pretend that if you just pray hard enough, you will have a baby or land the right job, beat the cancer or save your marriage.

Some imagine that if they muster enough faith, God will keep them safe from misfortune. However, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm does not dissolve into such wishful thinking. It acknowledges the reality that no one escapes anguish. Pain is part of life. It says, “*even though* I walk through the darkest valley.”

What makes the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm so vital to our wellbeing is not that it promises an easy path, but that it assures us that we do not face our trials alone. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley,” or, as the New Jerusalem Bible translates this verse: “even when I walk through a ravine as dark as death, *God is with me.*” Many people request that the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm be read at their memorial service because they want their loved ones to remember that God is with them.

There are 150 psalms in the Hebrew Psalter. Some give thanks to God for the blessings of life. They are like songs we cannot help but sing when life is sweet and beautiful. But the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm does not declare that God is with us only when life is rich and things are going our way. The author of this psalm swears that God is with us even when the earth beneath our feet gives way and we feel as if we have fallen into an abyss. This is the affirmation that can empower us to handle hardship. We are not alone. God is with us and can keep us from sinking.

This is not a scientifically proven fact on the same order as five is the square root of 25 or George Washington was the first president of the United States. It is a statement – not of scientific fact – but of religious faith. Faith is something different than a verifiable fact. It is not an impersonal piece of data. Faith is trust. It is an inward belief that something is true. And what we have faith in makes all the difference in the quality of our lives.

Pastor John Buchanan tells of reading the book written by Susan Sontag’s son about her last nine months of life as she lost her battle with cancer. Sontag was a distinguished writer and an intellectual. She and her son were both bright and articulate, but neither had any religious faith, so during her last days neither had any hope apart from a medical miracle which never occurred.

Buchanan says it’s hard not to admire the courage of both the mother and her son. At one point, the son writes, “My mother experienced no conversion. Her atheism was as solid when she died as it was in the heady days before her cancer.”

Her son writes that his mother’s religion was science and reason. However, after science had done all it could, there was nothing else. The son recalls a telephone call from his mother after she received a particularly grim report of what was transpiring in her bloodstream. She began to weep on the phone and said to him, “Say something.”

The son writes, “I kept thinking. But I could think of nothing to say...I said nothing. My mind was a doleful blank.”<sup>2</sup>

As she was dying, she had nothing to latch onto and he had no lifeline to toss her. He could find no words of comfort, nothing to alleviate her distress.

Imagine how different the end of her life would have been had she had even a smidgen of faith. Imagine how different the end would have been for her and for her son if they had embraced the claims of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. “The Lord is my shepherd...and even though I walk through a ravine as dark as death, I fear no evil, for *you are with me.*”

I will never forget the cold, dark day in January we buried Erica. She was a 21 year-old senior beginning her final semester of college. She had just begun student teaching and was looking forward to working with young children upon graduation. After a few days of dealing

with the flu, as she was beginning to feel better, she had a pulmonary embolism that took her life in an instant. To add to her parents' devastation, Erica was their only child.

Her mother was an elder in the church and I have a vivid image of her while I was conducting the graveside service. We buried Erica in the mountains of western Virginia. There was a foot of snow on the ground, it was bitterly cold and there was not a trace of sunlight in the threatening sky. However, as I read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, I glanced up at Erica's mother. Tears were streaming down her face, but as I was reading from my Bible, she was saying the psalm from memory right along with me. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley I fear no evil, for *you are with me.*"

And I knew, from the determination on her face and the depth of her faith, that she would survive this cruel blow. And she did. Because she knew in her bones that God was with her in the midst of her nightmare and she knew God would give her the resolve not to turn sour on life, but to keep living.

She will always carry the scars of Erica's death. She has fleeting thoughts of what might have been had her daughter grown into adulthood. There are still times of tears, but there are also times of joy. God gave her the strength to survive her tragedy and the will to carve out the best life she could muster despite her loss.

God gives us the courage to face life's most difficult challenges. Even when part of our heart has been sheared off, even when it is impossible to draw a deep, full breath, even when our brain is so numb that we cannot make a simple decision, we do not lose hope for a better day because we know God is with us.

I have noticed something about people whose close connection with God helps them survive the ravine as dark as death. Although the darkness is not changed, they are changed. Although their suffering is not wiped away or forgotten, they are transformed. They see the world in a different light and they reorder their priorities. They spend less time on the trivial and more time on things that matter. Their faith is more grounded and they are braver in the face of death.

We do not choose the dark valleys that we must tread, but we do choose whether we walk them alone or aware of God's presence at our side. My hope and my prayer is that when life takes you where you do not want to be, you will trust the Good Shepherd to see you through.

## NOTES

1. *Newsweek*, March 28 and April 4, 2011
2. John M. Buchanan, "Disappointed," March 2, 2008.