

## Yea, Thou Art with Me

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me . . . .

—Psalm 23:1–4

I spent the better part of today preparing for a memorial service for a member of my parish. A family member asked, as hundreds before her have, that we read Psalm 23—a portion of which is above. Perhaps the most moving line in the psalm for those who struggle with dark valleys is that last bit, maybe better known in the traditional King James Version: “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . Thou art with me . . . .”

Why are those words so comforting? In the last meditation we looked at what we can learn from suffering, but allow me to go farther. If we “get” the lesson of suffering, can we not just “get” to the end of the valley of the shadow of death? In the last meditation, I said that sometimes God’s answer to us is, “Trust me. I know what I am doing.” That really is hard, is it not? We would all like a god we can control. We would probably much prefer a god who is more like the ancient genie in the lamp.

I really like the story of Aladdin and his magic lamp. Disney did an rather good animated version a few years ago. The genie was funny, the bad guy lost, and Aladdin learned the value of being himself. But, as priest and writer Barbara Brown Taylor

points out, there is another insight that is hard for a preacher to miss: a genie is much more appealing than God. With a genie you know you have three wishes that you can redeem whenever you like. If the genie gets on your nerves in the meantime, you can make him go back into his lamp and play solitaire until you need him again. *Your* will is his command; if you are like me on wish number three, you just wish for three more wishes.

The difference between God and a genie is clear. God is not in the business of granting wishes. God is in the business of bringing sight to the blind, wholeness to the broken, and new life to the dead.<sup>36</sup> While we are not promised that we do not have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are promised that when we do, if we are willing to receive it, God will take our hand and travel alongside us.

There is a wonderful old prayer that says, "I said to the man who stood at the gate: 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'"<sup>37</sup> Few people I have met have understood this better than a young friend of mind named Emily.

Emily was a Latin major at the University of the South where I served as a chaplain some years ago. Shortly after her birth, Emily contracted rheumatic fever and as a result, rheumatoid arthritis. When this illness strikes, it is merciless and often crippling for life. Emily is just under five feet tall, unable to bend her legs. She used to ride a small cart around campus and had to depend on fellow classmates to carry her up stairs—an experience she and I shared on more than one occasion.

The growth of her arms and fingers was stunted, so holding eating utensils and carrying a meal tray were daily challenges. Over the years of her adolescence, Emily had an average of two operations every twelve months; her body carried the scars of

---

36 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), 109–110.

37 Batchelor, *The Doubleday Prayer Collection*, 146.

hopeful treatments. Emily is one of the most delightful people I have ever met. She never seemed embarrassed, and I have never heard her complain. I long wondered the secret of her contentment.

One evening, I asked her to speak about her life to the college community. She walked her hearers through what most would describe as a lifetime of horrors: surgery after surgery, one try after another to establish some sort of normalcy. The words that will ring in my ears for as long as I have memory were those she used as she closed: "If I had my life to live over again, I wouldn't change a thing. This affliction has demanded that I walk with God daily, depend on him constantly, for my very survival. I know he loves me as I am and I know he is the source of real life."

This young Christian had every reason to give up on God and on life, but her commitment to Christ brought as much healing to her as if her crippled limbs were restored to wholeness. Emily did not let suffering get the best of her, and she was healed not in body, but in soul. And for her, that was all that mattered. What I saw was not the desperate illness, but the power of God being revealed in her life.

When it seems like you are in that valley of the shadow of death, grab hold of God and say, "Yea, thou art with me."

### — Another Step . . . —

Are you traveling through the valley of the shadow of death right now? Are you holding God's hand? Are you letting God hold yours? If not, perhaps start now.

### A Prayer

Lord, make possible for me by grace what is impossible to me by nature. You know that I am not able to endure very much, and that I am downcast by the slightest difficulty. Grant that for Your sake I may come to love and desire any hardship that puts me to the test, for salvation is brought to my soul when I undergo suffering and trouble for you.

—Thomas à Kempis, d. 1471<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Batchelor, *The Doubleday Prayer Collection*, 165.