

“You Are with Me”

Psalm 23

Over the years I’ve listened to parishioners and read stories about near-death experiences. Usually it’s an out-of-body experience during which we see Jesus or some kind of bright light or we see both.

We don’t know if the experience is real or a hallucination caused by the powerful drugs we’re on to ease our pain or to keep us unconscious.

When I was in the hospital last summer for over two months, most of the time in ICU and heavily sedated, I had such an experience. I don’t know if it happened during the life-saving surgery removing the blood clot from my leg or if it was recurring, explaining why I remember it.

I have walked through many valleys in my lifetime. Valleys in the Rocky Mountains, Cascade Mountains, hiking to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, the Appalachians, the Swiss and Austrian Alps, and even the valley that connects Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee that Jesus walked many times. I grew up in the valley you look down into when you stand on the ridge at Mapleside.

I’ve been blessed to experience lots of valleys.

Then there are the metaphysical valleys that we all experience. The valleys of illness, of unemployment, of divorce, of grieving the death of a loved one, and the valley of loneliness and despair. We all walk through valleys at different stages in our life together.

When I was in the hospital fighting through pancreatitis, a blood clot, and a stomach infection, I was walking through a very dark valley. I was alone and heavily sedated. No visitors allowed. Looking up both sides, I didn't recognize the valley.

It was not one I had walked through before. All I could see in the darkness was the outline of the mountains on both sides. I was utterly alone.

Maybe it was faith, maybe it was all of your prayers filling me, maybe it was the drugs, maybe it was a combination.

Suddenly, I wasn't alone. There was a presence that was taking form walking next to me. I felt lighter as the presence became a man. I tried to see his face from the side, but his hair hid it well. We were moving at exactly the same pace, so I couldn't get ahead of him to see him. He didn't say a word, so we just walked together.

Then I saw a very white light at the end of the valley and thought we would keep walking into that light. But we stopped. Without looking at me, he simply said, "Go back". I didn't respond. I found myself turning around and going back.

When I awoke, whether it was minutes later or days later, the first thing I saw was the face of a nurse bending over me and asking, "Do you know where you are?" "No".

"Do you know what month it is?" "No." "Do you know who the president is?" "Yes."

Psalm 23:4 . . . "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."

I walked through one of those dark valleys. By the grace of God, I'm still alive. By the two words of Jesus, "Go back", I'm here today. By the power of your prayers, I made it back.

By the modern medical technology and the skills of doctors and nurses, I made it back. My grandfather, my mom's father, died from pancreatitis after being in the hospital for 10 days in 1979. He was in his sixties. We've come a long way. Back then, most people died. One of the doctors told me that today the mortality rate for acute pancreatitis is 45%.

I was told if I don't want to walk through that valley again, avoid fried food, red meat, and alcohol.

That pretty much kills the church diet. No more Giant Eagle fried chicken. My whole life, I've been eating everything put in front of me. No more. I lost 50 pounds in the hospital and with my new diet, I've kept it off. You sacrifice what you need to sacrifice. When Jesus told me to "go back", he had his reasons.

One of those reasons was to continue to walk with you through your valleys and mountain-top experiences. To walk with you at baptisms and funerals, to walk with you at weddings and anniversary celebrations, to walk with you at first communion and confirmation, to walk with you when you are in need or when you have been blessed to help others in need, to walk with you through cancer treatments, surgeries, and other valleys.

I was sent back to remind you over and over again that Jesus is your shepherd. As our shepherd, Jesus guides us to love one another, to forgive one another, to serve one another, to respond to one another's needs. Jesus shepherds us to not be in want, to live simply and to help others not be in want.

We support our Divinity food pantry, hunger fund, the Redeemer Crisis Center, Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry, Greater Cleveland Congregations (GCC), World Hunger Appeal and Disaster Relief through the ELCA.

We support one another spiritually as you did last summer through the power of prayer, through Bible study and Sunday School, through visiting in hospitals and nursing homes.

Psalm 23:1 . . . “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters”.

We were blessed with lots of green pastures this Summer with beautiful flowers and tender green beans. Our patio was a good place to recover, surrounded by colorful flowers and butterflies, hummingbirds entertaining, and hawks dive bombing our too many chipmunks for a quick meal.

Water and green pastures give us life while hiding from Rona-the death virus.

Psalm 23:3 . . . “He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake”.

It has been a challenge to stay connected to Jesus and his church when churches are only partially open during a very challenging 2020.

I wondered how many of you would come back to worship. I wondered when I would be able to do confirmation and first communion from last spring. I wondered if our building would get back to being as busy as it was before Rona. I wondered when I’d be able to do the funerals that have been delayed until the church opens. When I talked to Rachel, Pastor Don’s daughter, she said they wanted to wait till next summer.

But through all of that, the Lord has been true to his word in restoring our souls and leading us on right paths as we continue to praise his name.

The 23rd Psalmist ends his confession of faith with familiar words in verse 6 . . . “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”.

I tell people over and over, “it is only by the grace of God, by the mercy of God that he told me to ‘go back’”. Although it would have been just fine with me to walk with him out the other end of that valley and into the light.

So here we are, back together in worship, back together in ministry, back together as the Body of Christ, walking through our life together knowing we are never alone, especially when we feel most alone.

The psalmist is confessing his faith, “you are with me”. God is with me. We are confessing our faith. God is with you especially when you are walking through the darkest valley.

“I fear no evil; because you are with me. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

May the peace of God . . .