

The Shadow of Death **Psalm 23, Revelation 7: 9-17**

Have you ever heard a more depressing title for a sermon than *The Shadow of Death*? Of course, this title comes from a line in the 23rd psalm, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me” (v. 4, NKJV). This is not a sermon on death, but a sermon on faith, on living with the courage not to let fears distract or challenges deter. The 23rd Psalm is a powerful expression of faith in the Jewish and Christian religious traditions. Its poetic language invites us to experience its imagery: to walk in green pastures, immerse ourselves in still waters, and celebrate the beauty and healing properties of the earth we share--of which we are stewards. This is a sacred trust we mark this Earth Day.

The God of the 23rd Psalm meets all our needs: food, water, shelter, safety, relationship, companionship, meaning, and intimacy. God enables us to face the fear of death with confidence. Our faith in God is vindicated even in the presence of our enemies. We're safe and secure. We're given a calling: an anointing with oil just as the king was anointed with oil as a sign of his special vocation. We're promised abundance: protection throughout all of life and ultimately to be home with God.

Each of us enters the life of the 23rd Psalm with own hopes and expectations. Where do you long for comfort? How important is it for you to think of God as Comforter, as the One who makes you feel better? How important is it for you to think of God as liberator, the One who sets you free from what binds you, what imprisons and seems to keep you from making your life what you want it to be?

We seek healing. We need healing. Without healing and without peace we are ruled by anxiety and separated from our true selves. To follow Jesus, we must become ourselves. The power of the 23rd Psalm is to help us let go of our *fear of fear*, and be our best selves even in the darkness of life, even in the valley of the shadow of death. Peace is the gift of self. We find it in community. We discover it within ourselves as we choose to step into our fear and walk by faith. The gift you and I have to share with this world is the peace we discover in our lives, the experience we have of the living God, and our willingness to walk with others through their valleys of shadowed darkness. The hope we can give to others is the hope we embrace ourselves that "goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives and," in some mysterious and unknown way, "we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Revelation is the most well know of Christian apocalyptic writing. It offers a magnificent faith picture of the end of faith, that those who found the courage to endure great hardship and persecution are singing and praising God in God's very presence right now. Too often, we are caught up with the idea that Revelation and other apocalyptic literature in the Bible predicts physical events that will take place in a far distant future. Most reputable theological scholarship does not support such a view. The meaning of Revelation is more accurately summarized by this passage--Revelation 7. Its assertion is that ultimately God is God and that faith in God, trusting God's way, is the only secure way to live. It illustrates the idea that apocalyptic literature "asserts that life finally ends in praise." (*Finally Comes the Poet*, Walter Brueggemann, 73)

I hear these two passages, Psalm 23 and Revelation 7, teaching us about faith, that faith has three characteristics. Faith is activated on contact, available when needed, and powerful to the extent necessary. What is faith? Among other things, it is the ability to trust and to act on the vision you see and what you choose to believe.

What does it mean to you when I say, “faith is activated on contact?” To me, it means that ultimately life is hands-on. It is activated by contact with work, with action, and by doing more than thinking about doing. Faith requires relationships in the real world. It is activated by contact with other people, and all the messiness that entails.

I said that faith is available when needed. “When do you need it?” You need faith when you step out, step up, and move forward in the face of grief or loss. You need faith to walk through the *valley of the shadow of death*. One more question: how much faith do you get? The answer is simple: you get as much as you need.

About six weeks ago, I went to a National Leadership Training event connected to our church’s involvement locally with the Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity (More²). It was a challenging week with hard questions that pushed us to face many of our own assumptions and fears. One of the goals was to get us to trust ourselves and to act according to a consistent message: anything worth doing in life involves some risk and some effort. This includes to make yourself take action when it would be easier to fade into the background. It also includes choosing to listen when it would be easier to speak or act impulsively.

Faith kicks in when you’re willing to ask yourself hard questions and then stay around to discover your own answers. One of the hardest questions I know is asked in different ways. What do you really want? What is your dream? What is your calling? What is God calling you to be and do? The other challenging question can also be asked in several ways. What will you do to accomplish your dream? What will it mean for you be faithful to your calling? How will you make your faith tangible and visible in your family, your workplace, and in Kansas City this week, this month, this year? How will you give shape to God’s dream of justice, compassion, and inclusion in the world you touch?

In short, how will you invest yourself in your life, in your family, and in your church to realize the dream that burns within your soul—even if, at this moment, you don’t feel that burn? Because, in the end, life is not about being good, doing enough good things, or even helping people, but about finding the meaning of our existence by living life in the flow of God’s Spirit. It was that Spirit who brought life at earth’s beginning, who sustains life in every present moment, and who continues to renew life each day on this earth. It is about living our lives by faith as members, here and now, of that mystical and cosmic chorus singing—by how we live, by the values we champion, by the compassion we show, and by the generosity we practice--God’s praises in God’s very presence. “Blessing and glory, and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”