

## Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death with the Good Shepherd

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25, 1999. Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd." The Psalmist addresses the Lord in prayer. "You are with me; your rod and your staff - they comfort me." Calm. Serene. Comforting. But not all the prayers in the Psalms are calm, serene, comforting. Sometimes God's sheep got killed. Listen to how the Psalmist prayed then. "You have made us like sheep for slaughter. You have broken us and covered us with deep darkness. Because of you we are being killed and accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake! Why do you hide your face?" Do you hear the anger expressed for God and to God? Anger was also expressed to those who were responsible for the death of God's sheep. Listen to this prayer: "May they be put to shame and turned backward. Let them be like the grass on the housetops that withers before it grows up."

Ever feel angry with God? In John Gardner's short story, *Redemption*, Jack Hawthorn ran over and killed his seven year old brother David in a farming accident. Their father was nearly destroyed by his son's death. Sometimes Jack would find his dad lying on the barn floor, crying, unable to stand up. Dale Hawthorne's mind swung violently from desperate faith to the most ferocious, black-hearted atheism. One moment he was full of rage at God's injustice, the next moment wracked by doubt of His existence.

"I'm mad at the driver of the truck. I'm mad at God." Many of us won't admit anger towards God. Anger toward God might reflect poorly on our faith. Friends, the Psalms are part of God's inspired Word. God's people have used the Psalms to express, not only the comfort they feel in God's presence, but their anger when God is apparently sleeping or hiding. Anger addressed to God is not blasphemous. Anger towards God can be a sign of intimate knowledge of God.

*I will fear no evil*, the Psalmist writes. Trouble is I *do* fear evil. I fear evil when *its* after midnight, its past curfew, and one of my boys is still on the road. I fear evil when the phone rings at 3 in the morning. I feared evil last Sunday night waiting to hear how the accident victims were. I feared evil when I sent Mark off to school on Wednesday morning after viewing the carnage in Littleton, Colorado. I feared evil when Mark came home Thursday night and told us that one of his

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classmates had died of a heroin overdose. How can any sane person say, *I will fear no evil* apart from a strong sense of God's presence? Jennifer Gilbert wrote in her Memorial for her cousin, Laura, *For some unfathomable reason, evil crossed into the path of good.* Some unfathomable reason. *Why do evil things happen to good people? Why the valley of the shadow of death? Why Laura and Brittany and all those others? On one level the answer is easy.* Somebody drank too much beer and got behind the wheel of a truck and turned it into a cruise missile. *But on a deeper level better not give any answers.* The reasons are unfathomable.

After his mother died a slow and painful death from cancer of the spine, New Testament scholar, William Barclay wrote, *Why should my mother, lovely in body and in spirit, good all through, have to die like that?* His father said to him through his own tears, *You'll have a new note in your preaching now.* Barclay writes, *and so I had ~ not the note of one who knew the answers and had solved the problems, but the note of one who knew what the problems were.* Please don't pretend to know the answers to the question *Why?* The reasons are unfathomable.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me.* When archaeologists excavated the ruins at Pompeii, they found beneath the ashes of Vesuvius the body of a small crippled boy. Around the shoulders of the boy were the arms and the form of his mother. They'd been buried together in the hot lava and ashes. The jewelry on the remains of the mother indicated that she was very wealthy. Most of the wealthy people managed to escape from Pompeii before death and destruction descended upon them. But the mother evidently turned back to shield her handicapped son. She gave her life in protecting him. And in all the intervening centuries she's been there with her arm around his shoulders (Thieleman). *That to me is a picture of the love of God for his children.* Throughout the centuries the Good Shepherd goes with us through the valley of the shadow of death.

The image of that mother embracing her small son down through the ages reminds me of a children's storybook which has become a modern classic. A mother held her newborn baby and very slowly rocked him back and forth. While she held him, she sang: *I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, As long as I'm living my baby you'll be.* The baby grew. He grew until he was two

years old, and he ran all around the house. He pulled all the books off the shelves. He pulled all the food out of the refrigerator and he took his mother's watch and flushed it down the toilet. Sometimes his mother would say, *This kid is driving me crazy!* But at night time, when that two-year-old was quiet, she opened the door to his room crawled across the floor, looked up over the side of his bed; and if he was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him back and forth. While she rocked him she sang: *I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, As long as I'm living my baby you'll be.* **The little boy grew. He grew until he was nine years old.** He never wanted to come in for dinner. He never wanted to take a bath. And when grandma visited he always said bad words. Sometimes his mother wanted to sell him to the zoo! But at night time, when he was asleep, the mother quietly opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep, she picked up that nine-year-old boy and rocked him back and forth. And while she rocked him she sang: *I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, As long as I'm living my baby you'll be.* **The boy grew. He grew until he was a teenager.** He had strange friends and he wore strange clothes and he listened to strange music. Sometimes the mother felt like she was *in a zoo!* But at night time, when that teenager was asleep, the mother opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep she picked up that great big boy and rocked him back and forth. While she rocked him she sang: *I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, As long as I'm living my baby you'll be.* **Last Sunday evening the Good Shepherd lifted Laura and Brittany and held them in his arms. He rocked them back and forth and he sang to them, *I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, As long as I'm living my baby you'll be.***

God, the Good Shepherd, has come to us in Jesus Christ. The Good Shepherd gives his life for his sheep. *The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.* **The will of God for his children is life, not death.** Jesus did not come to destroy our children. Pain and suffering are never the will of God for his children. Let me say it as plainly as I know how. It was not the will of God for Laura and Brittany to die. No less authority than Jesus said it, *It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.* We

pray *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. God's will is not always done here on earth. God's will was not done last Sunday evening on Route 472, or Tuesday afternoon in Littleton, Colorado. Our consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Brittany and Laura die. When they died, God's heart was the first heart to break. Jesus wept!

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.* God is going to win in the end and, through faith in Christ, God's will is for us to share in God's victory. Years ago, before his death, I visited Bill Warner. I saw a VCR cassette that Danny had taped of a baseball game. Bill was looking forward to watching the taped game with Danny later that day. I joked with Bill. *Why watch a game when you know who's going to win?* Let that be a metaphor for our lives. We live our lives from the perspective of those who know the outcome. We live our lives and suffer our heartbreaks with the knowledge that there'll be victory at the end. Because Christ is risen we proclaim confidently *I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever*. God is going to win in the end and we're going to share in his victory. Death will not have the last word.

I learned yesterday that Brittany Wrigley looked forward to playing softball this summer. She was going to make great hits and play the outfield. Baseball is a great metaphor for life. We blow the lead and make all kinds of errors, but God is going to win the game in the end. We're terrible with a glove in the field and with a bat at the plate but God is going to win in the end. We're in the ninth inning. We're down by fifteen runs but God has inserted himself into the line up. He's standing in the batter's box. We're at the plate. We have two strikes against us but God's on deck and we're going to win. It's the bottom of the ninth. Two beautiful young girls just struck out. But God's walking to the plate. Death is not going to bat last. Drunk drivers aren't going to bat last. Guns and violence will not have the final at bat. God is going to bat last! God's going to win in the end - and, God invites us to share in that victory.

God of grace, you have given us new and living hope in Jesus Christ. We thank you that by dying Christ destroyed the power of death, and by rising from the grave opened the way to eternal life. Help us to know that because he lives, we shall live also; and that neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come shall be able to separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.