



St John Lutheran Church

1017 Montana
Libby, MT 59923
(406)293-4024

Psalm 23

Funeral for Carol Petek

There is no doubt Psalm 23 is among the best known and loved portions of Scripture. **We hear this** Psalm in many contexts ... **but especially** at funerals. **But even though** we hear these words frequently... **that doesn't** necessarily mean we fully understand what the psalmist is setting before us.

We begin on the occasion of carol's funeral with verse 4. "**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.**" Notice the tense that verse is written in... **It's present tense. It isn't that "if"** we walk in the valley of the shadow of death God will be with us... **or when** we come to the end of our life and find ourselves in that valley that God will be with us. **Rather, we are** being told that right **now... we are** in the valley of the shadow of death. **And...right now... God is** with us. **Indeed, from the** moment we are born we live in the valley of the shadow of death. **That valley encompasses** our entire life. **And, for the** entirety of life ... **from beginning to end ... God is with us. Our problem comes** in this ... **we don't** understand ...**either the** nature of our life... **or the** nature of how God deals with us in this life.

There is a very interesting incident described in Exodus 33. We read, "**Moses said, 'Please show me your glory.'** And He (God) said, '**I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you My name "The Lord."** . . . **'But' He said, 'you cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.'** And the Lord said, '**Behold, there is a place by Me where you shall stand on the rock, and while My glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen.'**" "**You shall see My back.**" That, my friends, is our life in this world ... **seeing at** the backside of God. Not seeing because of the veil of sin.

Then, in the Gospel from John 9 is the story of the man born blind. **Jesus says, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of the God might be displayed in him."** **In other words... this man** had to be born blind in order that the works of God might be seen in him. **We could put** it this way, "**It was necessary for this man to be born blind.**"

It is at this point that the weakness of our understanding shows itself. We cannot properly comprehend the "necessity" of God. "Why cancer?" we might ask in the case of your mother, your sister. In a different situation someone could ask, "Why the car accident?" Or, "Why the fire?" "Why the stillborn baby?" "Why?" and any of you can complete the question. Do you see what we're faced with? "It was necessary," God would say, "so that My work could be displayed." In situations like this we are always left with the backside of God. It is God who is at work... but sin blinds us to His great purpose... so we tend to see His backside instead of His face ...we cannot comprehend His purpose or His Will. Generally, We have no clue as to why bad things happen to us...and it is only after the fact that we see our God's hand in action....usually it's only as we look back that we see how God works in our lives!

Martin Luther put it this way, "'You shall see My back,' the Lord says to Moses when he asked that God's face be shown to him; that is, 'After the fact you will perceive my thinking.'" And this is where we are left. Waiting until after the fact. Waiting until God reveals His ways to us. And in the meantime... what we can expect in the valley of the shadow of death are two things:

We can expect, first... that God will exercise our faith to make it stronger. We can expect Him to remove one prop after another from our lives. One by one the things we depend upon will disappear. The earthy things that we count on will one day disappear. Instinctively you Christians know this to be true. Whatever we have come to depend upon ...those things that you think are failsafe can or will fail... health... job... our mind... the security of our possessions... money in the bank... physical and mental ability ... one by one these are removed from us. Removed, until at last we have only one thing left upon which we can depend ... God alone. At the end we are left totally dependent upon the mercy of God. God exercises our faith.

But, secondly, God never leaves us without comfort. Remember that our Lord Jesus was cut off from His Father...He suffered abandonment so that we would never be left desolate! There are times when we get brief glimpses of God's face. These are the places that God Promises to be for His people. In His Church...He gathers His people so that He can shed His Grace upon us. In preaching, and in God's Holy Sacraments. There God reveals Himself ... if only fleetingly ... to us. In Holy Baptism Jesus meets us in the water and plucks us from the kingdom of Satan... claims us as His own... and places us into His kingdom. Totally a work of God. Pure mercy. A glimpse of God's face. The psalmist says... "He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." That's what he's referring to in those words. Holy Baptism.

Moved by the Holy Spirit...we are led to confess our sins and what do we hear? God. Speaking through His pastor God proclaims to be forgiven. The psalmist speaks of "green pastures" in which our Lord makes us to rest. It is here that the Sermon on the Mount comes to mind. The Sermon on the Mount where Jesus gathered His disciples around Him on a grassy hillside... and taught them. Preached to them. Preached to them about Himself. We have the same thing when in preaching God speaks to us through His ministers. His Word ... the Bible ... is proclaimed to us. And in that preaching we learn about ourselves and how we fall short...how we fail to live up to God's perfect expectations ... that's the preaching of the Law ...and then we learn about what God has done for us in Jesus ... that's the preaching of the Gospel. It's always about what God has done for us...not about what we can or should do for Him. More mercy....more

Grace...seeing our Lord and God's face as He comes to us.

We see this in the Holy Supper the very Body and Blood of our Savior are placed into our mouths with His words ... **"Given and shed for you." "For YOU!" Why? For the forgiveness of your sins. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." That's how the psalmist puts it. "you anoint my head with oil...my...cup...overflows." See the connection! In the very presence of Satan and all his hoards God sets His table and feeds His people. And Satan? All Satan can do is rant and rage. He is powerless to undo the work of God. More mercy. More face of God.**

And there is a time coming, my friends ... **a time** that has now arrived for Carol... **when we** will no longer have to gaze only upon the backside of God. **As was the case** for her last Wednesday... **God will say** to you, **"It has been long enough." And at that moment** this life will end. **As Luther says.... then...then... we will** perceive God's thinking. **Then we will** see God's face plainly. **"For now we see in a mirror dimly,"** St Paul writes, **"but then ...face...to...face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."**

I am firmly convinced this is what your mother ... **your sister ... believed. She believed in** her Savior's mercy toward her ... **His sacrifice** for her ... **His forgiveness** for her. **Last Wednesday, I was privileged to do a "Commendation for the dying"** as Carol barely clung to life. **When I first arrived, she was quiet, and unresponsive...she seemed very comfortable...but very, very weak. As we were going through the Liturgy and rite Carol remained quiet and still. When we said the Lord's Prayer...Carol slowly moved her arms and folded her hands on her chest. At the end of the prayer she simply said ..."Amen." Later that night she passed into the Lord's presence....and now... Now she sees fully. The backside of God no longer stands before her. Now she is held in the very bosom of the Father ... fully seen, and fully seeing. May God in His mercy give each of you a similar faith. A similar end. And a similar eternity...this. that comes only through the God given faith and trust in Jesus Christ and His work for us. In the Name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit...Amen**

Rev. Eric M. Christiansen

St. John Lutheran Church
Libby, Montana