

Three Powerful Words

Psalm 23

Back in the first century B.C., the world was largely unexplored, unknown, and unmapped. Mapmakers had to have some way of portraying those areas of the earth that were as yet unexplored, so they symbolized these regions by drawing in dragons, monsters and large fish. The message was clear. Uncharted territories were frightening, fearsome places.

One story from that time tells of a commander of a Roman legion. Caught up in a battle that took him into the territory that the mapmakers had represented with their monsters and dragons, he was uncertain as to whether to forge ahead into the unknown, or turn back into the known, which would also be a retreat. He dispatched a messenger to Rome with this urgent request: “Please send new orders. We have marched off the map.”

We are now marching off the map. Today we find ourselves in uncharted places as we march off the epidemiological map, the technological map, the environmental map, the political map, the economic map, the demographic map, or virtually whatever map you can think of.

How can we possibly hope to navigate through all these uncharted realms; at least with any sense of our own selves still intact? One of our Scripture readings this morning answers that question. It speaks of the Shepherd who guides us: it is the Twenty-Third Psalm.

The power of Psalm 23 comes from its use of three powerful words, all found in its fourth verse. “Even though I walk through

the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear, for Thou art with me.” (Psalm 23:4 KJV)

And the first powerful word is: Though. David, the shepherd-king, whose anointing we have read of this morning in I Samuel, knew the truth behind that first word “though”; there are real dangers in this life. There was no “if” about the reality of life’s obstacles and problems for him. Psalm 23 candidly faces the inevitable. It proclaims not “if” but “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” Life isn’t all loaded tables, overflowing cups and green pastures. Sometimes our hair isn’t anointed with oil, but grimed with dirt. Sometimes we’re not lying in green pastures, but running just ahead of the prairie fire. Sometimes we’re not resting by the shore of still waters, but struggling to stay afloat in the raging tide.

Every one of us has a valley. Some of us have a valley we’ve been given at birth: a valley of poverty, or abuse, or disability. Some of us, born into green pastures, immediately proceed to dig our own valleys of shadow. All of us, though, will be led eventually by life’s circumstances into some valley; such as the one you and I are in now.

However, though none of us gets out of life without walking the valley, the Psalmist makes it plain that God does not intend for us to stay there forever.

That leads us to the second powerful word: Through. The valley of the shadow is something we go through. Valleys are not resting places or destinations, but passageways. We can walk through our crises. We can walk through our sorrows. We can walk through our pain. We can walk through our mistakes and failures. Because, of what God promises us in this Twenty-Third Psalm.

And that promise leads us to the third and most powerful word: Thou. In all these valleys, God will walk through with us. Even while we are “walking,” (note: the text doesn’t say we can “run” the valley but, while we are walking), the “valley of the shadow,” God is with us. And, this God who is with us, bears with us, bears all the sufferings and pains of the world and the hurts of our scared, scarred souls. God is with us in whatever we face. In this time of Lent, when our faces are turned toward the Cross, we remember that the Cross is the symbol of the agony endured by both the creation and the Creator. Because of the Cross, God, in Jesus, has felt what you feel, has been in and walked the valley, and knows the way through.

This is what the Thou of this 23rd Psalm means. God is the Thou, the word, that turns a “though” into a “through.” Though you and I walk in the valley of the shadow, we are not alone. Our shepherd is with us. Walking through the valley with us is the one who has suffered as we suffer, and has died as we die, to draw us to God: Jesus Christ, the Crucified, our Savior. Reach out to him. Trust in him. He is with you. Even though, no matter what, he will bring you through.