

“For Thou Art With Me”

Psalm 23

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I know that memorization has fallen out of popularity as an educational method. But I remain a proponent of learning by heart a poem or two, a psalm or two, a famous speech or two. It's a comfort to me to recite Paul Revere's Ride on April 18th every year. I'll be doing that tomorrow on my way to the Boston Marathon. It's a comfort to recite Paul's benediction at the close of the First Letter to the Thessalonians. His words are always on my tongue. I'm glad I can revisit the advice of Polonius to Laertes in Hamlet act one, scene three, when they seem relevant. The 23rd Psalm is in this same category. It's not that I recite the whole psalm to myself, but just the five words, “For thou art with me.” These are often sufficient. “Thou art with me.”

Soon, our twenty Confirmation students will be writing their personal faith statements. They've been looking for language that names what they believe, what they now hold to be true, what they can lean on when the going gets tough. Of all the faith statements that have ever been written, Psalm 23 is right up there near the top of the list. “For thou art with me.” The psalmist can only write these words of faith because his personal experience has revealed and established this basic truth.

David is assumed to be the poet who wrote this psalm. Though he became the king of Israel, he did not live a charmed life. He suffered the loss of a child. His daughter was raped. He lived with battle scars, what we might refer to today as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He wasn't particularly successful as a husband or a leader or a neighbor. His life was often in the proverbial PIT.

But what he discovers, and what humbles him greatly, is that God does not abandon him, that God is always present. About this, he is clear.

I have this mental image of King David waking up in the middle of the night, maybe in the middle of a nightmare. He picks up his guitar, strums a few chords, picks out a simple melody, and sings, “For Thou art with me.” It has the potential for turning into a fine Country and Western song, but it turns, instead, into one of the greatest faith statements ever uttered.

It’s not that God removes every pain from his life. It’s not that God heals every wound. It’s not that God allows him to win every battle. It’s simply that no matter where he finds himself, at the top of the mountain or in the darkest valley, he knows God is with him. This is an amazing truth to know.

At about age 12 or 13, it became obvious that I would benefit from some orthodontist work, that I needed braces to straighten out my teeth. This meant having a dentist remove the four bicuspids to make room for my other teeth to align properly. I remember climbing into the big chair and counting backwards from one hundred. The next thing I remember is waking up from the anesthesia and having no clue where I was, why my head was spinning around, and why I couldn’t feel anything in my mouth. But more than this, I remember my dad picking me up, lifting me onto his right shoulder, holding me firmly, and carrying me out to the car. His holding me so securely is what I will never forget. I can, to this day, remember the feel of his whiskers on my cheek, and the scent of his breath in my nose, as he carried me along the sidewalk on Maple Street in Springfield, Massachusetts. That feeling of security was so strong, even the memory of it sustains me now.

I doubt that I knew the 23rd Psalm at that time. But when I did read it and then memorized it; I understood what the poet meant, “Thou art with me.” I knew something of what it means to feel utterly vulnerable, utterly dependent upon a strength greater than my own.

When you have your four bicuspid removed, they don't grow back. You don't have to go through that particular ordeal again. But there are other ordeals that come along. They always do. One's parents aren't always there to scoop you up and hold you fast. It is the witness of the psalmist that we have a Divine Parent, a heavenly Parent, who is reliable and who is ever-present. “Thou art with me.”

I want Liz Miller to know that God is with her in East Lansing, Michigan.

I want expecting parents to know God is with them in the delivery room.

I want stroke patients to know that God is with them in the physical therapist's office.

I want anyone who is addicted to a substance such as alcohol or heroin to know God is with you in your recovery.

I want anyone who is looking for employment to know that God is with you in your next interview.

I want everyone who is going through a divorce to know God doesn't take sides; that God is with you both.

If you are a person who sometimes like to rebel and go against the current trends, I would recommend that you memorize Psalm 23. And when you get to verse four, stop right there.

“Thou art with me.” Let those five words penetrate your mind and your heart and your soul. Let these ancient words inform your faith. King David came to trust them. I have come to trust them. You, too, may trust them for the living of your lives. In the greatest of hope, Amen.