

May 8, 2022
For Thou Art With Me
Psalm 23
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...

My friend Scott is really sick. He has stage IV melanoma. He was one of my earliest Kayak coaches. I first met him more than 25 years ago. Last summer, we spent a weekend coaching together at a Kayak Symposium, up in Grand Marais, Michigan. It wasn't the first time we'd coached together, but this time struck me, maybe because of COVID and all its limitations, anyway, one evening all of the coaches hung out, doing what do, telling goofy stories of amazing trips, near misses, close calls, and reveling in the intimacy that comes from being with people who adore the wilderness and love the power of water.

I remember walking home that evening, in the inky darkness of a small town in the Upper Peninsula, marveling at the twists and turns that happen through the years, reveling as I realized that Scott thought I was a good coach and good paddler. His grown daughter was there, and he had encouraged her to come coach with me. I remember thanking God that my life is so blessed to be connected with such good, good people. It was one of those moments that imprinted on my soul. You know when those happen?

This past week I spent time again with Scott and his daughter in his hospital room in Ann Arbor. It seems that hospice is his next course and his time on this earth, is probably limited. I left that night again in the dark, this time, wandering the parking structure of the University of Michigan's Hospital, distracted and seemingly unable to find my car, reduced to starting at the bottom of the garage and walking up the way I drove in. Again, I was, literally immersed in the twists and turns of life.

Friends, I am sad. Sad about Scott's health and the debilitating speed of his illness, sad for his family, sad for him, sad for our kayaking community. There is, I think, much to be sad about: the continuing war in Ukraine, more COVID variants, the death of Patrick Lyoya, shot by a Grand Rapids Police Officer. I'm sad about the leaked brief from the Supreme Court. And sad about Christ the King Church in Taylor, holding its final worship service last Sunday afternoon.

In the midst of this all I find myself offering a prayer, murmured words that come unbidden to my lips: "Oh Jesus, hold us, heal us, help us." I literally find myself mouthing these words, not having even consciously thought them and yet there they are.

Oh Jesus, hold us, heal us, help us.

And then these words come back to me. Words I did not know as a child. Words I learned as an adult, when I began to wrestle with the harder parts of life. Words I once thought were sort of sappy and now know in my bones.

*Yea though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For thou art with me,
Thy rod and thy staff,
They comfort me.*

God has promised from the beginning of time to be with us always, God's promise and God's presence is here in this world that we can see, and I am certain it continues onto the world we do not yet know.

God's presence sometimes comes to me, and perhaps to you, in times of solitude and prayer, in vague, wafting ethereal manifestations but lately, more often, I feel God's tangible presence when I am with people, when I am with people completely and utterly. When I have put my stupid phone down, let go of worrying about what is next, and instead just place myself in the now. It is when I talk to my friend Scott, sit next to his chair, and remember what has been, and say the true words that matter, and hear him and together cry and laugh and despair and hope. It is then that I know God; and though we may be walking in a dark valley, the valley of the shadow of death even, I know that we are also on holy ground, God ground and that we need fear no evil, and that goodness and mercy are following us.

Friends these are hard times, a seemingly never-ending phalanx of obstacles that stretch before us. We can despair, or we can, come together, reach out, and run the race that is set before us, holding, and carrying one another, embodying God's unending love for and with and to each other.

These are times when we need each other. These are times when we need to manifest God's care and remind each other that despite it all, we will dwell in the House of the Lord Forever.