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March 2, 2008
‘The LORD is My Shepherd: Shadow Life’
Rev. Jim Wood

A group of parents of two-year olds led the reading of the 23rd Psalm:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Good morning church. My name’s Jim Wood and I’m a forgiven sinner and I love Jesus as my Lord and He is my shepherd. It is my joy that I am with my family in worship today. I hope and pray that whether you’ve been here many, many times or whether this be the first time that you’ve come that you will experience something today of the love of God that will let you know that there’s no place you can be where you are alone, that He is with you in and through all things, God Emmanuel.

We’ve been focusing on this 23rd Psalm through the Lenten season and it’s been a powerful experience for me at least in the preparation, the reflection. Today we are looking at the phrase as it appears in the New Revised Standard Version “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.” I love the way the King James version puts it - it’s actually just as appropriately translated, the Hebrew actually more literally is “the valley of the shadow of death” – “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil for thou art with me.” I hope you noticed today as we were reading it with all of these parents and these beautiful two-year olds that there was a change in the psalm. If you didn’t, go back at some point and look at that. Up until this point David as he’s been writing has been talking about the comfort that he has in knowing that God is his shepherd and it’s a powerful, powerful psalm, but

today something changed. David changed the tense. Today David doesn't talk about God, he talks to God: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me." I find this so significant because for any of us who have walked in the dark valleys, any of us who know what it is to feel even as if we are in the shadow of death itself, whenever that comes having the comfort of knowing about our God is a great thing, but not sufficient. It's only when we know that we can speak to Him that He is with us in the midst of that, in the midst of that darkest valley, in the midst of that deepest darkest place, that we find our real comfort. That's the power and the presence that we have to proclaim as believers of Christ, that our God is not a God that we can talk about as great and glorious as He is, but our God is a God who is with us in and through all things, with us in all places.

Our text in the New Testament today comes in the Gospel of Mark, the 14th Chapter. That's toward the end of the Gospel of Mark; it's in what we call the Passion Narrative. It's in this accounting of the last week, the last days of Jesus' life. Earlier in the 14th Chapter Jesus has celebrated the Lord's Table in Mark. He has called His disciples together. Now, He has decided to go off to the Mount of Olives, to a place called Gethsemane in the middle of the Mount of Olives. We'll talk about what the Mount of Olives is in a minute. It is a very, very confusing place. It's not as we often have it portrayed, so we need to know that in order to get our bearings in this text, but we will cover that in a minute. Gethsemane literally means "the oil press." It's a place somewhere on the Mount of Olives where work takes place in the midst of the day where people would bring their olives and they would press the oil from them.

Jesus has decided now as He is trying to prepare Himself for what is likely to come to call three of His closest disciples, those that He's called in two other instances to go with Him, Peter and then the brothers James and John, to go with Him to this quiet place, to go with Him to this place where He can pray. It is significant for us that Peter and James and John were with Jesus in the Transfiguration when He was transfigured and sat with Elijah and Moses, a powerful time. They were also the three disciples that Jesus had with Him when he raised Jairus' daughter. That's important for us but I think the real symbolism in them being with Him today is the fact that just a few verses earlier Peter in the 14th chapter has told Jesus that he would never deny Him, that he would be with Him, that he would stand with Him in the midst of all things, that there is nothing that would cause him to deny who Christ was. A little bit earlier in the Gospel, James and John have come to Jesus and said "Lord, we feel so close, so bound to you, that we feel as if we can drink from the same cup that you drink," so Jesus calls these three who have proclaimed themselves to be the ones who want to be with Him in the midst of all things. He calls them to go with Him. We don't hear it in this text, but if you know the story you know what happens. They keep falling asleep, they can't stay awake; they fail even the simple task that Jesus has for them to wait and to watch.

The other part about this passage that is so meaningful is one that confounds theologians constantly; you read commentaries and everyone wants to work around it because it says in the text and you'll hear it in a moment that Jesus is greatly agitated. It is a strong Greek word; it's a word that means that there is some great disturbance within. Then he is at the point of despair, so much that He gets down and prays. Now, for a Jew to get down on the ground and pray is very, very rare. Our ancestors were called when they prayed to lift up hands to heaven and lift up their heads. It's only when you're in utter despair, it's only in that place where you lose any sense of self-awareness that you fall down and so Jesus is at this place where He falls down and He begins to pray and to plead with God that God remove the cup, that what is to come doesn't come. Scholars have a hard time with this because it appears as if Jesus is incredibly weak and that He's confused and He doesn't know what to do and He is begging and pleading with God. It doesn't

fit real well with some of the images that we have of this God, this Jesus of ours, who goes in great nobility and bears the weight of our sins. This is true, but the passage is here because we need to know that at this point Jesus is utterly human, because if He's not utterly human, if He's only divine, if the humanity of Christ is lost, then His death doesn't bear the weight of our sins. It's a very, very powerful notion for us.

Let's just look at the text, just a few verses today.

New Testament Reading – Mark 14: 32-36

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."

He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated.

And said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake."

And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.

He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

I was reminded the other day in a weird way of something. Our very first call in ministry was in a small colonial town in New Jersey. We had a beautiful manse, a church-owned house that we lived in that was built in the 1870's. It was just a beautiful, glorious place. It was a great place. Zachary was born while we lived there; Adam and Ross were small, pre-school age when we got there. It was such a great little town. It was so wonderful that Ross was really learning. We felt like there was this great influence from the neighbors. When he was a preschool boy Ross would bring fresh flowers to his mom, sometimes three or four times a week. He would bring these beautiful fresh flowers. We thought, "Man, what a great community. There's got to be neighbors with all of these flowers and they're cutting them and giving them to Ross to bring to his mom. It's a wonderful place." Well, that wasn't quite what was happening. What actually was happening was that right behind our house adjacent to our back yard was a Roman Catholic cemetery, and we started noticing that there was a correlation between the fresh flowers that we would get and the funerals that would take place in the cemetery (laughter). What was actually happening was that Ross and his friends would go back after the funeral was over and they would take the flowers off and cut them and bring them to their moms as this great, great gift. Actually, the way we caught them was that one day in our back yard a half of a tombstone showed up and we said, "Something's going on here."

That's the thing about cemeteries, and you learn from living adjacent to one, is that cemeteries are not nearly as peaceful as we think they are. A lot of kids in this town, even some from our church, would go back and try to converse with the spirits in the evenings, late at night – usually 86 proof spirits (laughter). Other youth would go back there and be on the verge of what I might consider grave mistakes in their lives (laughter). Pretty good stuff isn't it? Thank you (laughter). At 8:30 it was just like water off their backs (laughter). Thank you. Cemeteries are rarely as

peaceful as they appear. Many people go visit. True story. On Sheryl's and my second date she asked me if I wanted to go meet her grandfather and I said, 'Yeah.' I knew how much she loved her grandfather even from the first date; I heard about that. She took me to the cemetery, Elmwood Cemetery in Columbia, South Carolina, because her grandfather had died a couple of years earlier and it was Sheryl's practice to go and just sit and to be able to converse, in some way with more her heart than with her grandfather. My experience is that those kinds of conversations are not as typical as the other type, the type of conversations that we seek to avoid, that when someone dies or when something passes the stories, the fears, the sins, the things that have separated us seem to be put away and so we spend so much of our time trying to just keep it as peaceful and yet it seems that it just keeps in some ways popping back up, popping back up, coming back up.

The reason I said it was important to know the context of the Mount of Olives was an unusual place. It was the ancient Hebrew cemetery; in fact, in the 14th Chapter of Zechariah, Zechariah has a prophecy where he says that what's going to happen on the day of the Lord when it comes is that God is literally going to push the Mount of Olives up against Jerusalem. It's adjacent to Jerusalem, but He's going to push it up against Jerusalem and it's going to raise up even Jerusalem itself and as it raises up even the tombs of the dead will be opened up and the saints will come. It's a powerful, powerful image. When we think of the Mount of Olives we think of this very quiet, very peaceful kind of place, but keep in mind as well it's right at the Passover. The Jews are coming to Jerusalem in that pilgrimage that is essential for many, many of our ancestors to come and there's no room for them. There are not enough accommodations for them in Jerusalem for them, so what do they do? They sleep out and very often they sleep at the Mount of Olives. They sleep in among the tombs in the Mount of Olives and there they are. We are listening to the story of Jesus and He's trying to find this quiet place in Gethsemane which is in the Mount of Olives, but we can only imagine that around it is all this commotion, all this conversation, all this noise, all this stuff that's there. Jesus is praying. He's praying and He's saying, "Lord, if this cup can be removed, please remove it from me." He tells His friends, "I'm so agitated, I'm in so much despair that I'm almost unto death itself," and yet all of this is going on, all of this activity.

Then you stay with that image – in the coming hours Jesus is betrayed, the coming day He's rejected, He's tortured, He's executed, and He's put in a grave in the Mount of Olives. Three days later these two women come and they see the tomb had been guarded by the Roman soldiers. The Roman soldiers had a lot to fear in Jesus; they were fearful that because there was this talk, this sort of underlying battling about the resurrection and that something might happen to Him, they needed to have that tomb protected so nobody could come and steal Him. They were fearful that Jesus' body would be stolen and then everybody would be able to say, "Look, He was raised from the dead." They were fearful that in that there might be this power kind of built up in this small community of rabble but it still might be able to empower the larger people and so they guarded the tomb because that's their fear. But, there's other fear taking place in the same thing for me. Cemeteries are rarely as peaceful as we want them to be or as we think they are. There's the fear of the disciples as well. Just keep in mind what's gone on with the life of the disciples in just these days. Here are the disciples, Peter and James and John. Peter who says, "Lord, I'll never deny you. Lord, I'll never deny you," and what happens? And James and John who said, "Lord, we can drink of the same cup as you. We are so close in our relationship with you that we can do, we can give, we can be with you in the midst of all things."

Here's what happens in those days, in the last days of Jesus' life. There's a woman who's unnamed who anoints his body and as she is anointing His body, the disciples are griping and complaining and arguing that it shouldn't be done. Here's a group of people who are watching as

Jesus gathers people for the Last Supper and tells them what is to happen and tells them what is the power and what is to take place. This is the time when we look at the bystander who carries Jesus' cross – not a disciple, but a bystander. This is the time when we realize that it's the centurion who's a pagan who is the very first one as Jesus dies to know on that day that this truly is the Son of God. This is the time when a councilmember, who very likely was part of that council that condemned Jesus and sent the execution sentence to Him, that gathers the body and takes it to his grave, to his family plot to be buried. This is the time where the women go to the tomb. This is the time when the women are there at the cross. This is the time when they go, and where are the disciples in all of this? The disciples have run away in fear; they've hid themselves. They've closed themselves up – the great powerful men that they thought they were to be. The men that said that they would never deny Him, that would never move away from Him, they've holed themselves up and are quietly trying to avoid any contact with the world. They are so fearful.

Here's the thing for me. When the disciples hear, when the women come back and say the tomb is empty, I think they would be filled with fear because they know that they are going to have to meet this God, this Jesus, this man, that they've done all these things to, that they've abandoned. I can only imagine what's going on in Peter's mind. Here's Peter who said, "Lord, I'll never deny you," and he did three times in just a few hours. What does he think? Does he think Jesus is going to come and just say "Peter, I forgot you did that?" No, he's worried. He's fearful. He's fearful that those sins that he's committed, he's fearful that that abandonment, he's fearful that that rejection that that's going to come back up him. The disciples are afraid that their actions are going to come back upon them. They have a fear of the grave just as much as the Romans did. This is the thing for you and me, I believe, that we live in our lives – that you and I have the same. We have this fear that these things about our lives, these things that we try to bury, these things that we try to put in the graveyard, these things that we try to cover up – we're fearful that they'll come back on us, so we walk around our lives so much filled with this fear.

I've been interested in television lately. I don't watch a lot of TV, but I've been interested since the writer's strike to see what's been going on. After they ran out of all of the first runs and the re-runs they've gone into reality TV. This is the huge thing in television right now. It's amazing. What better show can you come up with than *My Dad is Better than your Dad?* It makes me think about Elijah on Mount Carmel where he's out there with the Baalites¹. These bizarre shows. Here's the one that just bothers the daylight out of me. It's voyeurism to the extreme. It's the one, I don't even know the name of it, but it's the one where they strap a lie detector to you and you're asked all these answers and then you come before your family and they ask you the questions and if you answer them and you're truthful in your answering, you get a certain amount of money. You can reach a point where you can decide that you can stop answering. I haven't seen the show but I've seen enough of the commercials to know there are all these shocking things – it's like "Have you ever done anything that if your family found out it would cause them to be ashamed of you or reject you?" How are you going to answer that? Or, "Have you ever cheated?" It's weird and people will actually make decisions for money to answer that kind of stuff.

I've got to tell you I could never do that show, because I feel guilty for everything (laughter). I swear – lie detectors. When I was in my first life when we had a restaurant we would do these lie detector things they would scare the daylight out of me – I'm guilty for everything. If they strapped that lie detector on me and asked me about the Lindbergh baby I would confess (laughter). I would. I would just confess. I did it. I know I did it. Somehow, somewhere along the way I got responsibility for it. I really mean that. I've got this overwhelming sense of the stuff in my life that it's true that I know that things that I've thought that if I told you I fear you

wouldn't love me anymore, or I fear that you wouldn't respect me anymore. These things in my life where I look and I think "If only I had done this differently, maybe this wouldn't have turned out" and I take the responsibility of lives and of situations and people in that, and I do. The truth is I spend a lot of my life trying to bury that stuff, just to try to keep it deep enough and to keep the ground packed down enough so that it doesn't come back. But, the thing is is when I do that, I start to realize that all I'm doing is living a life of fear. Even though I'm not found out, I'm just living this life of fear. I don't know, maybe that means something to you, maybe that sounds like something for you. I think it might because I believe it's not just unique to me. I believe that this is the human condition, that we try to find ways to deal with the stuff of our lives and one of the ways the world tells us is "Just bury it. Just try to put it in a grave. Just try to pile it in there. Put your sins, put your shameful acts, put your shameful thoughts, just put it in there and just cover it up and don't let anybody know where it is and just hope and pray that it will never get lifted up, that it will never be found out, that nobody will ever walk past and kick up the dirt and start to find something that's in there and it starts to raise it's head. While we're doing it, don't we just live in these lives of fear?"

That's the fear of the disciples. It's the fear of these disciples who had turned away and rejected the very man, the very God that they had said nothing could separate them from. They had to be so afraid that they would meet Him. I've got to be honest with you, too, this is one of the things that I ask for forgiveness because I wish you had a better pastor who had these things figured out. I guess that's why we have three associates who have everything figured out (laughter). This is the thing for me that I feel sometimes in my life afraid even to meet Christ because of what's going on in my head and my thoughts and my abandonments and my movements away from Him. I always pray that when He comes He'll catch me at that right moment. I believe that this is what you and I face so much of our lives is this fear that we have of even meeting our God, that He would know who we are.

I've shared with you before that I had an encounter years ago with a young woman who was in a very inappropriate relationship and she knew it was an inappropriate relationship. She was living with a guy and it wasn't an appropriate thing. She came and wanted to talk about it. She wanted to talk about it but she didn't want to get into whether it was right or wrong, she just wanted to talk about something that came up in a sermon. This is what came up in the sermon, that I really believe that God sees us in all places. He knows everything about our lives; He knows who we are. That was okay for her, but I equated by saying this. I said, "It's almost as if your grandmother who loves you dearly can know and see everything you see, everything you do, everything you think," and that was eating her alive. The fact that God knew that she was doing something inappropriate, she could live with that, but the fact that her grandmother who had died could look down and see where she was and what she was doing was eating her alive.

This fear, trying to keep it covered up, I think is what keeps us and separates us from the fullness of life that we're supposed to have more often, the fullness of life that God has for us that abides with us. When we hear David talking about walking in the darkest valley or in the valley of the shadow of death, both of those translations are appropriate, but here's the setting: it's the sheep that are walking and they're walking in a desert land that only has rain a few months out of the year. When the rain comes the clay cannot absorb the water and so it just runs off. These huge wadis become huge flooding and it creates these huge, cavernous gullies. They are so long because the rain just keeps running and running. In the dry season when the shepherd is moving the sheep from one place to the next they have to cross them, and in order to cross them they have to go down into them. We're told by the archaeologists and we see it even today that they are so deep that they can even cut off all the light and it feels pitch black almost at the very bottom. That's where the sheep are most afraid, when they're in that darkness. That's when they're most

afraid is when they are in that darkness, and that's when they're most vulnerable, too. It's not just the fear; they're most vulnerable, because that's where the lions and tigers and bears, that's where the predators, that's where the things are that can hurt them. The comfort that David finds is that he walks through that even in that darkness, even in that fear, is to know that the Lord is with him. My Shepherd is here. "I know you are with me," he says. So, how do we get to that place in our spiritual lives where the very presence of God is not something that embarrasses but it's a thing that embraces us?

I had the privilege a few years ago of journeying with a young woman as she died. It's impacted me eternally. She was a young mom with an early-elementary daughter and a pre-school daughter and she was diagnosed with a form of lung cancer that was hard to understand what it was and what was going on, but it aggressive, it was fast, and the treatments were not working. She was in the process of dying. One of the great privileges in ministry is to be welcomed into people's lives and so I was welcomed into her life and began to spend time and talk with her. To see this woman of deep faith grow into an even deeper faith, to see a woman who walked in the valley of the shadow of death knowing that the shadow was a reality, and the comfort and the peace that she found in that and her relationship with Christ was just an amazing thing. In those last weeks, months, days of her life, she began to do things that just astounded me. She would sit and pull a piece of paper and she'd start writing things. We'd sit there, her husband and I at the bedside, and we'd think that now she's going to be writing something about a last will and she'd hand it to him and it was basically instructions on how to match little girls' socks with their dresses, or the kids' favorite recipe – how you're supposed to make mac-n-cheese. Those were the things that she was giving and there were these amazing gifts that came.

As we began to talk about the process, and for her to die was to die in the Lord and there was this amazing comfort. She didn't want to, but she knew what was to come and she knew that her family would be cared for, but there was one person in her life that she worried about the most. It wasn't her daughters and it wasn't her husband, even though she loved them and cared for them greatly, but she worried the most about her father. Her father had a huge impact on her. She said when she was a little girl every day her father would come home from work and "I'd immediately bring a story Bible and I would crawl up into his lap and my dad would start to read stories from the Bible, and as he did I would kind of nest in his shoulder. I'd kind of rub my head and my nose up against the fibers of his jacket, and all these years later I can remember the feel of that. When I think about going to be with my God," she said, "Jim, that's the image that is the strongest for me is to know that I'm going to be with a Heavenly Father who's going to call me upon His lap and is going to let me sit in the embrace. I'm going to be able to nestle there." She said, "I realize now that those stories were the foundation of all my faith and all my understanding." But here's the thing. Her father was a research chemist and as she wrestled with this insidious form of cancer, they finally realized that the cancer came from a fiber that her father had been doing research on. When he would come home and she would nestle up against him, she was literally taking in the fibers that these years later were causing her death. She said, "You know, my dad has done such a great job of being able to try to bury that so that he could be with me and love me through the midst of all of this and be strong for me, but I know when I'm gone that if he doesn't find the true hope it will be something that will be just digging up and he'll be walking around fearful that sooner or later it's just going to raise its hand and grab hold of him and he'll be overwhelmed with guilt." "I so desperately don't want that for him," she said.

I can only imagine what that's like, and yet at the same time I think you and I in some sense know. These things in our lives that we think have separated us from others, these things in our lives that we think have done harm for people, these things in our lives that perhaps nobody even knows but us – and here's the reality. Here's the truth. There is no shovel in the world that can

dig a hole deep enough to cover that and assure yourself it will never come back. The only way, my friends, is as this father came to know through years, the only way is to take that and not dig your own hole but to put it at the very tomb that the Roman soldiers guarded – because here's the thing. It's the only way that you and I can ever be free of it. The only way that we can know that it will never come back is that it is absorbed by the very God who died for us. The truth of our lives is that every day you and I have stuff that we can come and we can put at the tomb, and here is the assurance: if you trust and believe that if you put it truly in the tomb of Christ, if you put it in the love of God, you can be assured with confidence that it will never come back. The only thing that comes out of that tomb is Jesus Christ himself.

When He came back and He gathered the disciples, He said to them, “*zerate*.” It's a Greek word. It means a lot of different things, but ultimately its root means “rejoice.” This is the reality for us. This is who we are as the forgiven people of God. We have a place to put our stuff that will stay eternally buried and we can live into the wholeness of His life, and when that comes, no matter where you are, you will know the truth of the Shepherd's Psalm, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” through the darkest valley, “I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

Let's pray.

¹ Baalites – Elijah opposed the worship of Baal, and he engaged in a contest of miracles with the prophets of Baal and stated that there would be no rain or dew except at his command. After three years of drought, Elijah assembled the people of Israel on Mount Carmel where he demonstrated the supremacy of God over Baal.