

Comfort: When the Darkness is at its WORST

(Psalm 23:4)

In one of the Peanuts comic strips, Snoopy is shown on his doghouse typing a novel. He begins his story with the words: "It was a dark and stormy night." Snoopy always begins his stories that way: "It was a dark and stormy night."

Lucy happened to come by and put in her two cents worth of advice. In her aggressive, blunt tone of voice, she scolds him: "You stupid dog! That is the dumbest thing I've ever read. Who ever heard of such a silly way to begin a story? Don't you know that all the good stories begin, Once upon a time?" Lucy berates and belittles him more and then leaves.

The last frame of the comic strip shows Snoopy starting over on his story. This time he types: "Once upon a time, it was a dark and stormy night."

There are some stories whose writing seems to always begin by necessity with Snoopy's description of things: "A dark and stormy night." You and I have experienced such times in our lives when the darkness is at its WORST. We remember our experience as vividly as the psalmist David when he said: "Even when I walk in the valley of deep darkness."

Though translated death, the Hebrew word conveys the idea of darkness at its WORST. The word carries the meanings of deep darkness, gloom, death-like darkness. **Job 28:3** describes this darkness *as that of a mine shaft beneath the earth, shut off from any sunlight*. (Remember the miners trapped under the earth for weeks on end that is the kind of darkness that is described here).

Have you ever gone deep inside a large cave when the tour guide said: "In this part of the cave, sunlight can never reach? Let me show you how dark it would be without the light." All the lights are turned off and for a moment he speaks to you in the dark. It is so dark that you cannot see anyone standing next to you. It is darkness so thick you could cut it with a knife. (Tom and I had this very experience in Wind Cave in South Dakota).

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. The picture of **Psalm 23:4** is of a valley cut so deeply between mountainous hills that even when the sun is shining there is darkness on the path for the shepherd and his sheep. And when night falls the dark is so deep it can cause everyone to shiver. In such darkness one can only feel, not see.

David translates the sheep and shepherd experience in the valley of deep darkness to his own life. We humans who live on the earth have no more option than the shepherd and his sheep; each of us must also face the inevitable moments when we must pass through the deep darkness. It is not a matter of whether the dark event will come, but rather when will it come.

David did not choose this word by chance. It is a word that captures the whole array of disastrous possibilities when we live life. David could have used the Hebrew word for death or the place of the dead, but he does not. He could have used the words for darkness, night or shadow, but he does not. He could have used the words for trouble, evil, pain, persecution or affliction, but he does not. He uses a word that describes that moment for us when life is at its WORST.

Mankind has always feared the dark in the same way that little children do. Darkness brings an irrational, nebulous kind of fear. When you ask children why they are afraid of the dark, they never seem to be able to answer in one word.

There are many words that articulate the many faces of their fears--death, someone evil, the devil, lions, snakes, monsters in nightmares, tragedy, pain, guilt, persecution. Deep darkness symbolizes and colors the whole spectrum of life's WORST possibilities. But the question is not so much what the deep darkness is as "When the darkness comes, just what will I do? What will happen to me when the dark day comes? How can I walk through the valley of my deepest darkness?"

Deepest darkness is inevitable for anyone who walks the pathways of life. Each one of us has or will experience our own dark valley. You may be able to identify with me for a moment as I share a few of my times of difficulty when life turned particularly dark for me. If you think back, my stories of the dark sound so much like yours that they probably are yours!

I recall as a first grade child being taken to the boarding school for the first time and feeling the deep darkness of abandonment as my parents drove off in the family vehicle. This was the first of many such experiences for the rest of my years of boarding school.

I remember the fear as a young child as I traveled across the United States in a bus with my parents to attend my Grandfather's funeral. We were not going to make on time so we had to board a plane in Albuquerque, New Mexico and fly to Dulles Airport in Washington, D.C. The whole experience was very difficult as I met all kinds of people that I did not know and went to many funeral related events and I could not fully grasp the meaning of these events. My sister and brother were not there and my folks were very busy visiting with the relatives. It was like a deep darkness to me.

Through life we have had much grief over the deaths of family, friends, church members, co-workers and shared in the grief of friends who have lost loved ones. Not only is death an event to face but the loss of someone very close to us brings such a dark shadow over our life that the sunlight is shut out for a while.

We all remember that moment in our life when we first felt the loneliness and pain of rejection? The hurt still sticks in our memories as if it were a splinter so deeply embedded that we can not remove it. For you and me those moments of rejection were the times when we walked our way through the pitch darkness of alienation.

Once again, we can all recall a time when we failed miserably and the disaster plunged us into the darkest, WORST despair. The human condition is such that we can remember our failures vividly through the gloom of guilt until we were able to rectify the situation and receive forgiveness.

All the facets of deep darkness become as numerous as there are human lives. There are far too many for us to name them all. We would despair if we looked into the future and could only see the way meandering through the cliffs down into the valley of deepest darkness. But we are like David, the psalmist; we fear no evil when we look into tomorrow's darkness because we feel the presence of someone who is always there when the darkness is at its WORST. That someone is the Lord.

David and the people could face the future because whenever darkness came the Lord was the Shepherd-King over them. This psalm was probably used in the temple at Jerusalem for the annual New Year's enthronement service of the king of Israel (and later Judah).

In Hebrew thought, the shepherd and king are synonyms. The earthly king, reigning from Jerusalem on Mount Zion, was to tend and care for the people as the representative of the Lord. He in turn acknowledged how God had so intimately cared for His people as a shepherd cares for sheep.

The word "shepherd" is a word of intimate, personal concern. When the darkness had been at its WORST they each could reflect privately and collectively upon how God had been so close in His relationship and so nurturing in His providential care. **As individuals and as a nation they could remember the expression of the Lords' covenant love in the hardest of times.** You might read all the psalms with this in mind. (Jesus spoke of "distress of nations, with perplexity" in **Luke 21:25 KJV** at the end times and Paul spoke of "perilous times" in **2 Tim 3:1 KJV** and we are living through all of this together in faith today). We see that so many of the Psalms resound with the mighty acts of God and His daily care of His people. The recounting of the Lord's deeds and salvation abound throughout the Psalms.

The Israelite's especially could remember the deepest darkness of the captivity of Egypt and how God saw the affliction of His people, heard their cry because of their task masters, knew by experience their suffering and came to deliver them through Moses in a miraculous Exodus. When the darkness was at its WORST, David and the people could recall how the Lord had been there to lead them through.

David especially remembered those days in his life. Can you picture him as a young boy tending the sheep of his father alone out in the Judean wilderness among the hills? Can you hear the lions or the bear growl and the bleating of the sheep? Can you feel his heart pound as he whirls the sling aiming the stones at the beast? "What if I miss," he must have asked.

Or can you imagine yourself as a teenager before Goliath?

Or after his successful life as a warrior for Saul, can you feel the rejection and anger toward Saul, the king who sought to kill him? Go with him to the Cave of Adullam as he sits alone, waiting inside when the darkness was at its WORST.

Or follow David through his many battles with the Philistines and finally find him with the WORST "battle death" of all: his son, Absalom who brought his own army in rebellion against his father, David.

Or when his failures brought the darkness of guilt over him, hear his lament: "*When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all the day long*" (**Psalm 32:3**).

David was no unrealistic ascetic shut off in some quiet, undisturbed monastery. He faced real life with real moments of real valleys of deep

darkness. His life story in the book of Samuel and in the book of Psalms could well begin with Snoopy's lines, "It was a dark and stormy night."

Why has **Psalm 23** been read so often by soldiers going into war, hospital patients facing surgery, ministers needing a word from God to bereaving families at funerals, or even businessmen whose business is about to become bankrupt? Why indeed? Because in the Psalm we find God the Lord who is a real, divine presence actively and intimately involved in our lives!

An interesting example of how many people going to the hospital will read **Psalm 23**. A gentleman by the name of Joe Gross said that periodically they must replace the Bible in the Chapel at the Hospital. The reason is **Psalm 23**, because the page in the Bible upon which **Psalm 23** is written is so worn out from use that the whole Bible around it has to be replaced also. Occasionally, someone will tear out the page and carry it with them. Why? They are precious words of light when the darkness becomes the WORST.

In the book *Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King Jr. tells of an episode in Montgomery, Alabama on November 13, 1956. The bus boycott had begun and black churches had arranged car pools. For eleven months the car pool went well until Mayor Gayle sought and secured legal proceedings to end the car pool so that blacks would be forced to ride the buses again -- in the rear of the buses of course.

It was Dr. King's responsibility to tell the people at the mass meeting at the church and he said, "For the first time I almost shrank from appearing before them." Evening came and Dr. King found courage to speak to them.

"We have moved all of these months," he said, "in the daring faith that God is with us in our struggle. The many experiences of days gone by have vindicated that faith in a marvelous way. Tonight we must believe that a way will be made out of no way."

Even though he said the words, he felt a cold breeze of pessimism pass over the audience. He recalled, "The night was darker than a thousand midnights." The court opened and the hearings began with obvious intentions of Judge Carter to rule in favor of the city. Was the cause of the whole Civil Rights movement to die? No!

During the noon recess, a commotion began in the courtroom. Mayor Gayle was called to the back room. Then a reporter came to Dr. King's table: "Here is the decision that you have been waiting for. Read this release." The note read, "The United States Supreme Court today unanimously ruled bus segregation unconstitutional in Alabama." Dr. King wrote of that moment:

"My heart throbbed with inexpressible joy. The darkest hour of our struggle had become the first hour of victory. Someone shouted from the back of the courtroom, 'God almighty has spoken from Washington!'

"The dawn will come. Disappointment, sorrow, and despair are born at midnight, but morning follows. 'Weeping may endure for a night,' says the Psalmist, 'but joy cometh in the morning.' This faith adjourns the assemblies of hopelessness and brings new light into the dark chambers of pessimism."

Such is the experience of **Psalm 23:4**, "*Even while I walk through the valley of deepest darkness, I fear no evil; for thou art with me!*" The valley of deepest darkness will come and is inevitable, but just as inevitable is the presence of God with us in our deepest darkness and actively involved in our life. When the darkness is at its WORST, the psalmist reminds us to keep our mind set on the Shepherd and listen to His voice and look for the power of His rod and staff.

At some time or another most children lock themselves by chance in a closet, bathroom or room. Perhaps such has happened to one or more of your children. The following is a true story related by Grady R. Brittain, the original author of this sermon. He was at home one day when one of his children was locked in a closet while playing hide and seek. He goes on to say...

It was dark. The child could not see. The child frantically tried to open the door but it was locked. Tears and fear overcame the child. But as the father I began speaking through the door to my child. The crying and fear subsided as I talked. While I secured a knife and screwdriver, my child knew there was a real presence that could not be seen but was felt. After several frightening moments of deep darkness, the door was opened. During the whole experience my child was being assured for I kept saying, "I am here. I will not leave. We will get the door open. Don't cry. Just sit quietly."

I know it seemed like an eternity in the dark for my child, but the darkness did not last. It was inevitable that a way out of the darkness would be found...just as it was inevitable that my presence and action was there the whole time.

We do not know what the valley of darkness has been, or is, or will be for any one of us, we certainly have had our share, as we know that you have also. But most assuredly we know the Lord who is our Shepherd and His presence will see all of us through. It is inevitable that He is present even though we do not see him.