

First Parish Congregational Church
East Derry, NH
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Sunday, February 12, 2006
Text: Psalm 23
Rev. Lucy M. Alexander

“Thou Art With Me”

Picture the Middle East.

I can remember learning in grade school about what is now Iraq: the land of the twin rivers. I can remember hearing about the fertile crescent, about the cradle of civilization. It felt like an almost idyllic place. Almost as if it didn't exist on a map but was somewhere in imagination, a place of exotic people, tales, aromas.

But the Middle East has come down to earth with a thud. It comes nightly into our living rooms. I try to look beyond the images I see on my 9 by 12 screen. There a street is shown. Is that actually a street in Baghdad? There the cameras pan over some buildings. Is that what buildings are really like in Iraq? And nightly come the reports of devastation. Killing, violence, chaos escalated to such a point that it is not possible to move down the street without elaborate security precautions. The names strike fear in our hearts: Fallujah, Baghdad, the Sunni triangle.

Everywhere there is sand. I read a book recently of a soldier's account of his tour of duty in Iraq. It was the sand that seemed to be part of almost every page of that account. The way the sand permeated all his clothes, got into his weapons, got into the place where he slept. It was simply everywhere and would not leave him alone. And then he described the sandstorms. How the sand was so thick that it was impossible to see. Biting sand was the air he breathed, digging into his face, insinuating itself into his hair, his body.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

I don't know about you, but those words have always conjured up peaceful pastoral scenes for me. Maybe Ireland or Scotland. Green grass softly covering a hillside on which there are clusters of sheep. But the 23rd psalm was not written in Ireland or Scotland. It was written in the midst of the desert by a nomadic people. People who knew well the extreme cold of the night and the ferocious heat of the day in that desert world. People who knew well the flat horizons extending for miles. People whose home was in no specific place, but rather a wandering with sheep. People who had very little to rely on by way of food, shelter, water. And yet the psalmist sings, “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” People who lacked just about everything we might call everyday needs declared that, with God, they lacked for nothing.

Refocus your lenses for a minute. Take another picture. Bring another image into your mind. This time, New Orleans. Though New Orleans has too often been bypassed for the sake of more headline-grabbing news, it came through our TV screens and radios this past week with the health care crisis. Doctors from all over the country set up a temporary clinic in, of all places, a zoo, for people who had no medical records, had lost prescriptions and had no way of getting new ones. People who had serious conditions which had gone untreated. All because of water.

Water, that very source of life, became a source of death those days last summer and Fall. The sheer force of it, enveloping and destroying an entire community and the lives that had been lived there. Water that had come into homes through carefully architected plumbing, now razing those homes to the ground. Water. Water which makes up such a large percentage of our bodies, water which is even more important to us than food for survival. That same water encompassed the dry land so that there was no longer any barrier.

Precisely the fear of the ancients. There are many ancient creation stories from which our own Biblical creation story was descended and they all have this commonality. Water separated from land. Water held within bounds so that humans would have space to live safely. God separated the sea from the dry land and declared that it was good. The floods that threatened to overcome the created world at the time of Noah were finally held back. Water represented the source of chaos to our Biblical forebears, and when that chaos was no longer allowed to overtake them, they felt God.

He leadeth me beside the still waters.

Again, the peaceful pastoral scene is the first that has come to mind for me. God leads me through a grassy meadow that I might sit by a calm lake. Sun permeates the scene. There is not a cloud in the sky. But that is not the sense of the psalm. These waters are still because the raging chaos of the depths has been quelled by God. These are the waters after a storm, perhaps still a bit murky after having been so churned up, but now still, no longer threatening. Life-giving. These are the waters that are an oasis for the shepherd and the sheep.

We have seen that this psalmist – whether or not King David – has not had an easy life. But his trials and tribulations are not over. The chaos of nature now gives way in him to emotional, spiritual, psychological chaos. External fears and dangers are now found to be within the deepest recesses of himself. He walks through the valley of the shadow of death. Parents find that their young child has fallen into the snow after heavy drinking. A husband kills his wife and child and flees to England. The diagnosis comes. The life expectancy for this type of cancer is two years. Depression overtakes a teenager to the extent that she literally cannot get out of bed for a year. The wealthiest country in the world has an ever increasing homeless population.

I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

O come on, God. Who cares? You let this happen, didn't you? Or maybe you made it happen. Maybe you thought I deserved this? Maybe you had this planned for me all along. They say that you only give people what they can handle. Well, I don't buy that, God. This is not something I can handle. Let me say that right up front. I cannot handle the death of my child. I just can't do it.

I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

Ok, God. Those are nice words. But to tell the truth, I'd much rather have a cure. They say that spiritual healing is the most important. They say that cure is not really what we should long for. But I have to tell you God. What I want is a cure. I want to live. I have to admit it. Living is much more important to me than your presence God.

I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

How can the psalmist even say that. I don't feel God. I used to feel God. I used to feel this warm sense of presence in and around me. But now, just when I need it most, that presence is gone. I don't get it. Right when I need you God, you seem to disappear.

What good are you anyway? And I have to tell you God, I'm pretty angry. And I can't stand the thought of going to church. It feels so tame. Sitting in the sanctuary as if everything is ok between me and you. Well, I have to tell you, it isn't. And I'm not going to pretend it is.

I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

You know, it's funny, I woke up the other day and something was different. The alarm went off as usual. The light in the room was about the same. I knew I had to get up pretty soon, make the coffee, put on my clothes, get ready for work. I knew I should check in with my friend who had asked that I should call. Everything seemed about the same. So I looked around, puzzled. Everything seemed normal. And then I realized what the strangeness was. My first thought upon waking had not been about what had happened. I had actually been able to open my eyes without being immediately being plunged back into blackness. I became aware of all this as the weight began to return. I could feel the heaviness begin to find its way back into my heart again. I could feel my body begin to be pressed back into the bed as usual. But the moment had been there and I knew it.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. Surely goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me all the days of my life.

In his book, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, Harold Kushner tells the following story. "A rabbi stops a prominent member of his congregation in the street and says to him, 'Whenever I see you, you're always in a hurry. You're always rushing somewhere. Tell me, what are you running after all the time?' The man answers, 'I'm running after success, I'm running after prosperity, I'm running to make a good living.' The rabbi responds, 'That's a good answer, if you assume that all of those rewards are out there ahead of you, trying to elude you, and you have to run hard to catch up to them. But what if the rewards are behind you, looking for you, but they can never find you because you're running away from them? What if God has all sorts of wonderful gifts He wants to give you, but you're never home when He comes looking for you so He can't deliver them?'"

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

May we all dwell in the house of the Lord forever.