

## The Word in the Shadow (Psalm 23)

It is a warm blanket we wrap around ourselves in the winters of our lives. We've recited it so often the words are *worn* with use; so worn that it's easy to *miss* their power—until some life event happens and a word, a phrase, a sentence—jumps out and grabs you.

On most disability Sundays, the word *walk*, even in scripture, would *definitely* grab me. And I certainly wouldn't be the one reading the phrase, "I walk". It just sounds too weird coming out of *my mouth* in a service which highlights the fact that I *don't walk*.

But this sermon isn't about the word "walk."

Several years ago, when I could in fact walk, albeit with crutches, the phrase, "thy rod and thy staff" jumped out at me. *God walks with crutches!* I thought. But I no longer walk with crutches.

So this isn't about the phrase "thy rod and thy staff."

This sermon is about "THE SHADOW OF DEATH." That shadow, not just that phrase, jumped out and grabbed me a year and a half ago. Like it has grabbed so many of you.

We all live in the shadow of death. Society tells us over and over again to deny it: HIDE your wrinkles and your age spots. If you can't skydive at 90, something's wrong with you. Most of us deny death most of our lives—Until some life altering event happens, and reminds us that some day we will *die*.

On August 18 2017, I was diagnosed with cancer. The shadow of death made my heart race. It quickened my breath. It jumbled my thoughts so much that I couldn't hear anything the doctor said after he said "cancer"—a word so powerful that for decades it was called, "the Big C"; so powerful it's still hard to say.

But cancer isn't the only shadow of death I spent that year in. I was also in a much magnified version of a shadow which people with disabilities spend our *lives* in; a shadow similar to the one *women with and without disabilities* live in and in some ways similar to the one African Americans live in:

A shadow of death that says, "We don't *believe you*" or "Yes, we believe *something* happened to you, but whatever happened, you must have the details wrong" or "What happened to you will have no bearing *whatsoever* on our decision."

A shadow of death that says, "Your lives *don't* matter".

It's almost 2 o'clock in the afternoon. I'm lying in bed in a rehab center / nursing home. I was discharged from the hospital 2 months ago after spending four days fighting an infection. My legs have lost what little strength they had. Three weeks in one rehab center did nothing to restore it, so now I'm here. The walls are gray; the paint is peeling. The room reeks of urine. I spent my childhood in an institution—too many people with disabilities have spent their childhoods [and longer] in institutions—I spent my childhood in an institution that looked, smelled, and felt like this one. That time in my life is my definition of *hell*. The minute I wheeled myself into this building, I felt my body contract. I had to remind myself to breathe. I am sure this is PTSD. I've been reminding myself ever since to stay focused on the goal: Rehab. Restoring my strength so I can get the *hell* out of here; so I can go *home*.

Now it's almost 2 in the afternoon and I'm lying in bed. . .Lying in bed crying, screaming, *begging* for someone to get me out of bed; out of bed so I can go to the therapy session I was supposed to be at *an hour ago*. I *hate* screaming and crying. I hate begging. I know that God does not want his sons or daughters reduced to begging. But in this moment this is the only power I have.

Nurses aides have come in several times—and flipped off my call light and told me, "We're busy. You need to be patient." People with disabilities are *always* supposed to be patient. *Our time, our lives—don't matter. Mytime, my life—* The very reason I came here—*Doesn't matter*.

God is here in this shadow of death. Has *been* here. She came as a social worker—an African American woman named Zachera. A woman who *knows* this is wrong but has about as much power as I have to fix it.

"Do you have a quote that gets you through hard times?" she asks.

I could care less about quotes right now, but I give her one:

*What looks like the end of the story is NOT the end of the story.*

It's not a quote. It's a Word from God. A Word in the shadow. A word that came in the darkness of night as I sat terrified. Terrified because my legs weren't regaining strength—

*What looks like the end of the story is NOT the end of the story. . .*

PHARAOH was NOT the end of the story for the Israelites.

The PIT was NOT the end of the story for Joseph.

The SHADOW OF DEATH is NOT the end of the story for you.

What looks like the end of the story is not the end of the story

For the *Trevon Martins* of the world either.

What looks like the end of the story is NOT the end of the story

For the Sandra Blands of the world.

What looks like the end of the story is NOT the end of the story

For the Christine Blasey-Fords of the world.

And what looks like the end of the story is NOT the end of the story

For *all* the people with disabilities who are told day after day; several *times* a day—

--That we must *shut up* and be *shut away*.

That we must be *on time* for able-bodied people.

That we must be *considerate of an able-bodied person's needs*.

But *OUR time*

*OUR needs*

*OUR LIVES*

DON'T MATTER.

And as I lay in the bed waiting that day, another Word in the shadow came from the God inside me, who said:

*Your tears are my tears. Your begging is my begging. Your screams are my screams.*

Someone finally came to dress me. When she asked me my name, I said it quietly.

"Oh *NOW* you're quiet!" she said.

The Word in the shadow *also* responded inside me then. With a word I can't repeat here.

In the days to come, when she is dressing me again and I ask her to adjust something, she will snap, "Do *you* want to do this or do you want *me* to?"

When she starts to get me out of bed the day after I had an upset stomach, she will ask me if I need to go to the bathroom. When I tell her "No" she will ask, "Are you *sure*? Because I don't want to get you up and then have to undress you."

Yes, we are supposed to *go to the bathroom* only when it's *convenient* for able-bodied people to assist us.

When I return from therapy at 3:30 one afternoon, a CNA will ask me if I am ready to go to bed. I think she's joking—until the look on her face tells me she is not. I have two choices, she says: I can go to bed now or wait 'til 11 o'clock—because they are really *busy*.

All of this is merely a concentrated version of what the SHADOW OF DEATH called *oppression* looks like in my day-to-day world; in the world of people who have disabilities.

But in this shadow, and in the shadow of death that is cancer, God set a table before me:

At that table was *Almarie Wagner*, who called me one day and asked, "Who can I yell at for you?" And, along with several other people, brought me books, and decent coffee!

At that table was my friend Alyce, who brought me coffee and great conversations — and did my laundry, because no one in this place *cared* that my laundry got lost almost every time I sent it to be washed.

At that table were Margaret and Don Burk, who *always* have a seat at any table God sets for me—in and out of the presence of my enemies—

And Julian DeShazier, who walked into the building and before I had a chance to open my mouth said, "If you weren't going home soon I would *carry* you out of this place!"

God loves a paradox, and so, in the presence of the enemy called "cancer", in the literal shadow of death that *is* cancer, in the very room where I got chemo, she set one *gorgeous* table!

With food—free lunches—from some of the best restaurants in Chicago.  
Where Amy, a nurse with a wicked sense of humor, made me laugh every week.  
Where Almarie Wagner and Ann Marie Coleman talked about sexy heads, and although they couldn't describe exactly what made certain bald heads sexy, assured me that *mine* met the criteria!

The Realm, the Kingdom, of God was in that room, where a holy spirit, *the* Holy Spirit, knit us together in an unspoken but palpable bond.

A bond so strong that another patient—whose name I couldn't remember—left me a note one day:

*Dear Mary,*

*I enjoyed our conversation so much the other day! [What conversation??]  
I noticed you carry a small purse with you that looks pretty well-used [How incredibly polite and tactful of her! What I'm sure she REALLY MEANS is-- It's filthy. It used to be white but now it's black and yellow and coffee stained]—so I bought you this new one. I hope you like it, and I wish you the best.*

These were and are the people at the table God set and sets before me in the presence of my enemies—

The enemy of cancer,  
And the enemy of oppression.

Who sits at the table God sets for *you*?

Martin Luther King ?

Don and Ann Marie Coleman?

Helen Sutton?

Anita Hill and Christine Blasey-Ford?

Your sister

Your mother

Your grandmother

Your father

Name them. Honor them.

For they remind us of one more truth in this psalm:

As surely as violence and bigotry and oppression follow us, goodness and mercy shall *also* follow us all the days of our lives, and nothing--nothing now or in the future-- can keep us –

From dwelling in the house of the LORD forever.

Even if—

You are abused by a cop and risk being shot simply because you are *Breathing while Black*—

YOU DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD, NOW AND FOREVER.

Even if--

We are harassed or raped and no one but *God* believes us—

WE DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD, NOW AND FOREVER.

And even if--

We are ridiculed and left to rot in a bed screaming—

WE DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD, NOW AND FOREVER.

*That* is the Word in the Shadow. *That* is how the story ends.

Amen