

21 November 2021
Psalm 23; Romans
8:31-39
What do we say?
Eternity Sunday
First Mennonite
Church

The passage in
Romans offers up
quite a promise,
doesn't it? Paul
is *convinced that
neither death,
nor life, nor*

*angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height,
nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the
love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

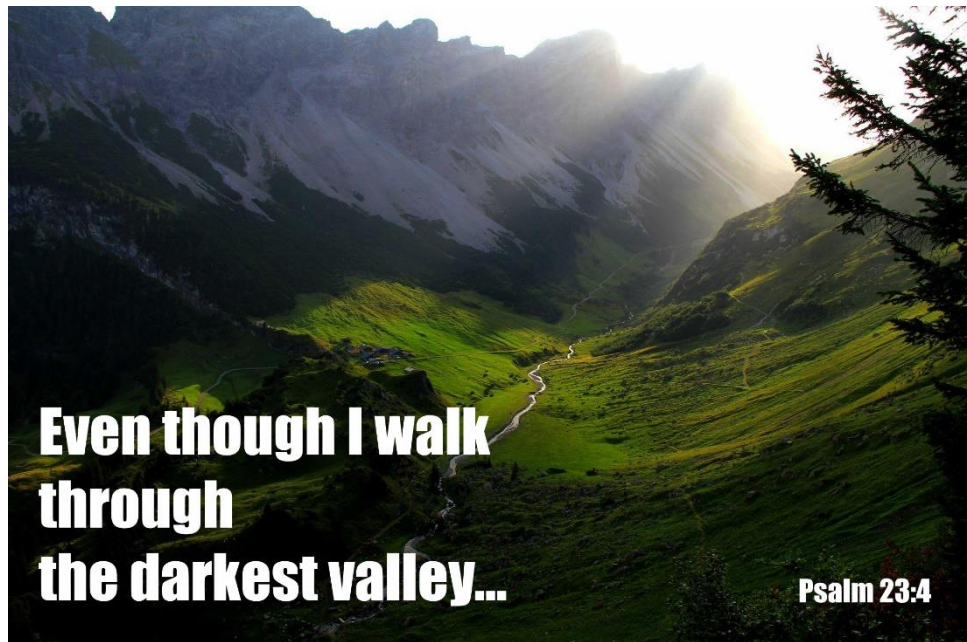
Paul's convinced. Are we?

Sure, we may pay lip service to Paul's words that nothing, not even death, can
separate us from the love of God, but the simple and stark reality is that **death
does separate us from the ones we love**. A year ago, these 12 loved ones whose



names are listed in our
bulletin were alive. They
were our parents, friends,
grandparents, and maybe
even great-grandparents. A
year ago, they were with us.
Today they are not. We lit
candles in their memory.
Death does separate us
from the ones we love.

Just before this eloquent and comforting passage of hope and promise, Paul
contrasts two ways of living in the world: the way of the earth and the way of the
Spirit. These two ways of living are like living your life guided by God's Spirit or a
way of life where you are guided by your own desires, wants, and needs. They
are like living your life for yourself or for others.



The thing is, it doesn't matter whether you are living the way of the earth or living the way of the Spirit—for into all life, trials and tribulations, pain and suffering, evil and death will come. It's like the rain in BC or the snow here on the prairies—it falls on the just and unjust. Suffering and death happen to both the faithful and unfaithful. Everyone dies and leaves behind loved ones who grieve their death.

Of course, there are theologies out there saying that if you believe in Jesus hard enough, if your faith is strong enough, you can skirt life's trials and tribulations, pain and suffering, evil and death. Like a "get out of jail free" card you use in the game Monopoly. Trust in Jesus, they say, and you will be blessed with countless riches! During our ongoing pandemic, it's become quite popular for some Christians to say, "if you trust in God, you won't get Covid." They say, "you don't need a vaccine; all you need to do is pray harder, trust in God more, have more faith."

But this kind of theology has its dark side too. What happens when you get sick, lose your job, become mentally ill, begin to suffer from chronic pain, get Covid, or your loved one dies—then what? Suddenly that Monopoly card no longer works. Does it mean that you didn't pray hard enough? Your faith wasn't strong enough? You didn't give enough to church or charity? You didn't do enough, serve enough? Is God punishing you? Is God rejecting you for not being good enough? Is God judging you for not being faithful enough?

Do any of us walk around wondering if God is angry with us because of what we said or didn't say, for what we did or didn't do? Do any of us feel we aren't worthy, don't measure up? That we're in danger of having our name erased from the book of life? I hope not.

In our Hebrew Bible there is the story of Job. Job has just lost his home, his farm. All Job's children are dead. Now he has lost his health, his body disfigured with open sores. Job's friends hear of his misfortune and come to console and comfort Job as he goes through the valley of the shadows. When Job doesn't repent or acknowledge his sin, but becomes angry with God, his friends turn on him. **One friend** says, think who that was innocent ever perished (4:7). Are you perishing? Let's figure out what you've done wrong to deserve this. **A second friend** suggests to Job that if he was pure and upright, God would answer him with prosperity (8:3-6). Job's **third friend** says God is all wise, all knowing. God knows what is best

for you. And then comforts Job by saying, you're just a guilty sinner. With friends like this, who needs enemies?

There is a story in Luke where two tragedies happened. The first one was about Pilate ordering some of his soldiers to go into a place of worship and kill some pilgrims from Galilee who were praying and offering sacrifices. The second tragedy was the collapse of the Tower of Siloam which killed 18 people. In both tragedies, people asked why. Why did Pilate send in the military to slaughter those Galileans who were kneeling in prayer and performing sacrifices? Why did the tower fall and kill 18 people? Why did these terrible things happen?

Or take the story of the man born blind in John's gospel. The disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). It's obvious, isn't it? Good people are prosperous and healthy while the evil ones sink into poverty and illness. God blesses the faithful with riches and punishes the evil ones with poverty and disaster. This friends, is one of the main messages of many TV Evangelists.

Many years ago, my oldest son was born 3 months prematurely, and then spent more than three months in the hospital, half of that in the neonatal intensive care unit. It was a medical emergency when he was born. On the day he was taken by emergency c-section, and for days after, I lived with the real possibility that my child and spouse would not survive.

My spouse had done everything right. She ate a well-balanced diet. She exercised. She went to see her doctor regularly. Yet, the pregnancy went wrong, and she and Chris almost died.

You see, it doesn't matter if you are living the way of the earth or the way of the Spirit—into every life suffering and death will come. Why? **Because we are human.** We are finite and limited. We are frail and broken. We are born, dependent on the love and care of mother and father; we mature and accomplish life's tasks as best we can. But our lives move on. Sometimes great things happen. Sometimes bad things happen. Sometimes we do great things. Sometimes we fail and sin. Sometimes we believe and doubt. Sometimes we struggle and we conquer. We never let go of our humanness, though. Listen to how the Psalms describes humans:

*[Humans are] like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers. (Psalm 90:5-6)*

Basically, we all have a shelf life. At some point in time, our lives will expire.

What's the good news for us who are gathered here to remember our loved ones who have died? Long ago, God sent Jesus into the world to show us God's character and what a life lived under the reign of God looks like. We didn't like what we saw and experienced, so we put Jesus to death. But God raised Jesus from the dead as a sign of the truth of Jesus' life, his words, deeds, and ministry. The resurrection was a sign that, we too, can live the kind of life Jesus lived, that we too can live in confidence, joy, and hope. The resurrection is a sign of God's power to defeat sin and death, that God's power lies beyond the grave. This God, who so loves and cares for us in life can and will love and care for us in death.

It doesn't mean that we won't experience grief, suffering, or death today or tomorrow. Of course, we will. But we have access to God's eternal strength and power through the gift of God's Spirit, the living Spirit of Jesus. We have access to the same Spirit that Jesus had access to when he lived on earth.

In the gospel of John, the Spirit of Jesus is a guide that will guide into all truth. The Spirit is also a comforter who will comfort us in times of stress and need, an advocate, and even a helper who will abide with us forever (John 14). In the book of Acts, the Spirit will give us power not just to be witnesses, but to discern right from wrong, to live God's way, and to empower us to endure and preserve when we encounter hard times, when we go through the valley of the shadows of death.

How will the Spirit help us endure, persevere, and heal as we grieve and suffer? Today, Psychologists speak of "grief work", the psychological process of coping with a significant loss and working with emotional pain, feelings of grief and sadness so that, over time, your mind and spirit can heal.

If you've ever lost a loved one, you know about the pain and sorrow. When I was young, I lived on an acreage near Winkler. On our yard was an old house my dad was tearing down so that he could reuse some of that old wood in our new house. Anyway, I was walking on the floor of this old house. There was lumber everywhere, some of it broken and jagged while some boards still had nails in

them. Some of the floorboards were rotten. I stepped on one of them and fell partially through. My hand hit a jagged 2x4 and torn it open. Blood started pouring out of the very jagged wound. There lots of bits of wood in the open wound. It hurt like crazy. I had to get stitches. I still remember how painful the needle was going into the wound to freeze it before the doctor could clean it and stitch it up. Losing a loved one is like a painful wound. It's like your heart is about to break.

If you've ever lost a loved one, you know that it takes time to heal. Sometimes it can take years because we all grieve differently. And that's just how grieving feels, doesn't it? It is hard, tough work. Grief work is a lot like walking through the valley of the shadows of death. "The hour of lead," is how Emily Dickinson named grief.

There are many ways we work at our grief. We can pray. We can rely and depend on the prayers of others as many people who experience profound grief find it hard to pray on their own. Other ways of working on our grief are sharing your story with others. This is why there are support groups for people who have lost loved one to suicides or to tragic car accidents. Sharing your story of grief is a powerful way of healing. Other ways of healing include prayer, especially the prayers of others for you. Being part of a faith community that is committed to caring and walking alongside us when we fail, sin, suffer, and grieve is another way of healing.

One very small way we try to help people heal is by conducting this very simple worship service of remembrance. We named and lit candles of those who died this past year. It's an odd thing, really, to light a candle in the face of death. It's a small act. It's almost a nothing act. Almost. But not quite. Lighting a candle is something. Even the smallest, single candle flame brightens the darkness. And for me, for many of us, lighting a candle is also a prayer. Prayer opens our hearts and minds to God, which means that our hearts and our minds are more open to each other.

And that's why we have this service of remembrance. We light candles to remember those most dear to our hearts who are no longer with us. We light candles to acknowledge our brokenness and loss in our lives. We light candles to remember significant places of death, violence and grief in our broken world. We do this as one small part of our grief work, our healing work.

In my grief at almost losing a spouse and a child, I was more like Job. Job was very angry at God and asked some tough questions. If God is the Creator, then why do the innocent suffer? If God isn't responsible for the suffering and injustice in the world, then who is? Whose world is it, anyway? I found that I needed to ask the question, why. Why do bad things happen to good people? I read. I prayed. I even wrestled with God. It was hard work.

In the end, I concluded that there isn't an answer to the question, **WHY**. I discovered the answer why the innocent suffers lay somewhere in all my questions, my struggle to make sense of it all. Grief work is hard work. Yet it's critically important work.

Those who are willing to question, those who are willing to work, really work at their grief, those who are prepared to rant and rave against God, hurl questions against the dark silence...these are the people who may encounter God and be changed by the encounter.

We say prayer changes things. But what things does it change? We often think that if we ask God long enough and hard enough, that God will grant our wishes, our demands, our desires.

Psalm 23 says, *Even though I walk **through** the darkest valley...* did you notice the verb? it doesn't say avoid, deny, fly over, or walk around the darkest valley, but **through**. We must walk through the darkest valley. What this means is our situation of grief we find ourselves in may not change; rather it is us that are changed because of our questions, our grief work as we **walk through** the darkest valley. It's not that God will change the situation we are in, but we will change. Our understanding of God will change. The encounter may even transform us. In this way, prayer changes things.

You know, whenever I look at my hand, I see my scar. Immediately, I'm taken back to that day when I fell through the rotten floor of that old house. Now, I don't think about it every day because the wound has healed. God's loving, abiding, and powerful Spirit can help us heal too. God is beside you, walking with you as you walk **through** the valley of the shadow of death.

What can we say? God doesn't remove us from this world. God doesn't prevent us from experiencing pain, suffering, and death. God does, however, give us the power of God's Spirit to endure, persevere, heal, and thrive. Why? Because *I'm convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present,*

nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen