

Psalm 23:4

“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 last time we gathered in our house of worship was to celebrate 100 years of grace in this congregation. You will remember that the last words your pastor spoke at that time were to remind you that even though our joyous Centennial was drawing to a close that we have greater things to look forward to, namely, that Jubilee of jubilees in the New Jerusalem where we will sing with the angels and archangels and hear the trump of God. Here we will join in the great celestial song with the entire heavenly host.

Now we are again gathered in our house of worship to administer the rite of Christian burial to this our departed sister in the faith. Having fallen asleep in Jesus, she has already entered that New Jerusalem for which all true believers are preparing themselves and steadfastly looking forward. We say this because the departed fed her soul with that one and only source of spiritual nourishment, the Word of God. In that Word she learned from the Law that she was a sinner and from the Gospel that Jesus was her Savior from sin. Under the gracious direction of the Holy Spirit she clung to Jesus as her Savior, the Great Shepherd of her soul. This Great Shepherd was her guide and

comfort through this vale of sorrow and with David she could say:
“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.” Psalm 23:4

On the basis of these words permit me to speak to you briefly about:

The fear of walking through the dark valley

I – The different kinds of this fear

The most terrible and fearful thing upon the face of this earth is the death of a person by nature. For by nature a person seeks the highest good in this earthly life and joy, peace and happiness in earthly things. When death comes, one must say with a sigh: *“Now, must I leave everything that my heart loved so dearly behind?”* This is the greatest tragedy and the saddest story that can ever be told. In deep anxiety one thinks about the house that was home and must be left behind, and also of the dark room of the grave will take its place. With pain one thinks about the gold and good that this world offers and all this is now lost. Everything must be left behind. The individual stands as poor as the day he or she was born. The thought of death fills everyone with fear. As the eyes become dim, the lips and tongue quiver, shake and grow quiet, as strength slowly goes out of the body, the thought of the end is filled with terror. A natural man, woman, or child may not think that death means complete annihilation, but

rather an earnest message from God, a calling to appear before the courtroom of the Great Judge. One may think there will be a judgment according to deeds and either unspeakable blessedness and glory in heaven or unspeakable pain and punishment in hell. If this were true, then the false and carnal trust of a person is destroyed and security is in vain. With these thoughts, there can be nothing but doubt and despair. The individual cries out: *“Oh, if I could - I would live until tomorrow - what will become of me?”*

There indeed have been many unbelievers that have seemingly met death unruffled and undisturbed. But this seeming peace is nothing else than a speechless despair. They are quiet because they feel: *“What does it help to be troubled and disturbed?”* They think: *“My fate is already decided.”* Many an unbeliever may desire to die. But even though an unbeliever may die in outward peace and quiet, yet such a death is terrible because their eyes will open in hell. In this way Judas wanted death because in the face of his life in sin, Satan led Judas to despair so that he feared more to walk before the face of God than to face death.

Also, Christians (*true Children of God*) are not entirely free from anxiety and dread of death when they must walk through the dark valley. In the 18th Psalm David, who was a man after God’s own heart, says: **“The cords of death entangled me; the**

torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me.” Psalm 18:4-5 In Psalm 55 we read: “My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.” Psalm 55:4-5

Hezekiah prayed for an extension of life. He implored the Lord with these words: “Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. II Kings 20:3 It is difficult to look upon the terrible picture of death. It cannot be denied, death is going through a valley that is dark. The strength and wealth of all the men in the world cannot change this picture, only the grace of God can overcome the fears of this king of terrors. Let us learn from David how death’s fears are overcome. He says: “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.” Psalm 23:4

II – How the fear of death through the grace of God is overcome

Here we learn that if a person wants to overcome the fear, terror and the horror of death and the grave - the believer must forsake the world and fasten the heart’s desire upon the Lord and trust in his grace. A true believer will trust in God’s grace and then use that Word of God (*Bible*) as the staff of life. God’s grace

is therefore the highest good. A believer can cling to the Lord with the hand of faith and ask him to stand close by. In this way the Lord's grace is the greatest treasure available. With David we can all say: **“. . . your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Psalm 23:4** A believer will then say that it is alone by God's grace and Holy Spirit that he or she has been led to make such a confession and trust. It is alone the promise of the Gospel that gives the believer strength to say in the very middle of the dark valley: **“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.” Psalm 23:4**

Death, grave, hell, damnation - all these things are now gone because the grace of God has changed everything. The grave now is a cottage of peace; death is the gate of life; and the departure from this world is now an entrance into heaven.

There are many people that believe that religion is living according to the Golden Rule: *“Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”* But where is the individual that has perfectly done this? Where is the person who is perfectly clean and has no sin? Oh, how disillusioned such people are who have only learned the Golden Rule. Peace of conscience and hope of salvation cannot be found in the *“Golden Rule”*.

No, the way to life is quite another thing. The individual who has learned that he or she is a poor, lost and condemned sinner

only worthy of eternal damnation and in desperate need of help has come further along to the way of salvation than one who boasts of good deeds and virtues. Forgiveness of sins and salvation comes only to those who have seen their need and therefore plead for God's grace in Christ, and look to him alone for salvation. Thus we sing:

Christ alone is our salvation - Christ is the Rock on which we stand
Other than this sure foundation - will only be on sinking sand
Christ, his cross and resurrection is alone the sinner's plea
At the throne of God's perfection nothing else can set one free

We have all things Christ possessing: life eternal, second birth
Present pardon, peace, and blessing while we tarry here on earth.
And by faith's anticipation foretaste of the joy above,
Freely given with salvation by the Father in his love.

When we perfect joy shall enter it is in Christ our bliss will rise.
He's the essence soul, and center of the glory in the skies.
In redemption's wondrous story planned before our parent's fall,
From the cross unto the glory, Jesus Christ is all in all.

The apostle Paul had come to know that in Christ he had God's Grace and that through him he would be saved. Therefore, Paul left behind the world, and he did not fear any kind of death. With all his heart he could say: **"We live by faith, not by sight."** **II Corinthians 5:7** and also: **"I am not ashamed of the gospel,**

because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” Romans 1:16

At Marie’s grave it is a comfort for us to know that for her God’s grace meant everything. She at all times gladly read and heard God’s Word. How she rejoiced to receive God’s grace in the Sacrament of the Altar in order to be bound closer to her Savior. Her lingering illness confined her to her wheel chair, but how often she remarked that she missed the public worship in church. Now she no longer needs the administration of the Word of Sacrament for she is in the Church Triumphant. Here she is clothed with a white robe and stands before the throne of God continually bringing praises to his holy name in perfect joy and happiness.

May all of us remain faithful unto death that we may also obtain the crown of life.