

"Feels Like Today,"

15 May 2005

Bible passage: *Psalm 23:4 (TEV)*

"Even if I go through the deepest darkness,

I will not be afraid, God, for you are with me."

Some of you may remember the story of Dr. Jerri Nielsen. She was a 46-year-old doctor working in Ohio when she made the decision to take a year's sabbatical at the South Pole Station on Antarctica—a place considered to be the most remote and perilous on earth. Those who inhabit the station there live in almost total darkness for six months of the year, and in winter, temperatures go as low as 100 degrees below zero. There's no way in or out until the spring.

The reason Nielsen decided to go in that direction was that her life was in a mess. She found herself living with her parents, escaping an abusive marriage. However, in the midst of trying to deal with that reality, she was also coping with fragmented relationships with her children. When the opportunity came to go to the South Pole, the winter darkness of that place probably didn't seem much darker than part of the life she was living in Ohio.

It was during the long winter of 1999 at the South Pole, that Dr. Nielsen, the one who had sole responsibility for the mental and physical fitness of the team of researchers, construction workers and support staff who were there, discovered a lump in her breast. She consulted via email with doctors in the United States, actually here at IU, performed a biopsy on herself, and in July began chemotherapy treatments to ensure her survival until weather conditions permitted her rescue in October. Then by means of a daring rescue by the Air National Guard, a replacement physician arrived, and just minutes later the plane took off with Jerri Nielsen.

Her story is a rather dramatic story of some of the darkness many of us experience in life, and it brings to mind the words of our Bible passage for this morning. This 23rd Psalm is familiar to some of us, and is sometimes referred to as "The Shepherd's Psalm," because it begins with the words, "The Lord is my shepherd..."

We have a verse of that psalm as our focus for today. Our version puts it this way: "Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, God, for you are with me." Those of us who know this psalm may recognize it as saying, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me." That's the way it is sometimes heard at funerals or memorial services.

A year or so ago, I had the privilege of hearing Rabbi Harold Kushner talk about this entire psalm, and he spent time talking about the original Hebrew in which it was written. While we most often hear the words, "valley of the shadow of death," Kushner stated that most Biblical scholars agree that the Hebrew text does not speak of "the shadow of death." In all likelihood, the original Hebrew word that was used actually meant "deep darkness," and that's why I've chosen the Bible version I have for today.

Certainly, many times the writer's deep darkness had to do with living with the grief that comes after the death of a loved one, and Kushner also suggests that darkness the writer was talking about might have had to do with the realization of his own mortality. Any of us here this morning who've experienced that kind of pain and loss can probably identify with that the psalm. We do feel as though death's shadow is clouding every moment of our existence.

However, there are many other kinds of deep darkness that we experience in the course of life. For Jerri Nielsen, trying to survive an abusive relationship and the loss of her children were devastating experiences, and a form of deep darkness. A person trying to cope with understanding a medical diagnosis and its ramifications for life can feel as though darkness is surrounding them. Anytime we experience the pain of lost love, lost dreams, or turmoil and uncertainty about the direction of our lives, we are living in a kind of darkness. I suspect many of us this morning could name our own experiences that may seem like a deep darkness to us.

What are we to do? I think it helps if we go back to the Bible passage, because it's easy to miss one critical word in the passage. Remember, it says, "Even if I *go through* the deepest darkness." "Go through, it says. Not "stay in" darkness; not "quit living," but "go through." Clearly, the writer wants us to know that, even if it seems that the darkness will never go away, it will. There is a process involved here, and actually all of our lives are in the process of recognizing and adapting to the changes that have come to our lives. It's important to realize that we may have to walk in the darkness for a while, but eventually, some day, we will once again be able to live in the light and know that life can still be good.

"Through" is a key word for us to remember. Nothing is forever, and oftentimes, we have to put one foot in front of the other in order to make our way through whatever comes to us. To me, it seems that the word "through" is actually a word that offers us hope, and hope for a better day, a new day, is what gets many of us through some pretty dark times in our lives.

In Jerri Nielsen's case, it was the support of her friends there at the South Pole that helped her make it out of the literal darkness of the Pole and the darkness that had marked her life. In her book *Icebound*, she talks about one of those friends that she referred to as "Big." She said that when she was feeling her worst, Big would sit up next to her at night and read her passages from the book *Endurance*. *Endurance* is the story of Shackleton's struggle in 1915 to survive and keep his crew alive while attempting to cross Antarctica from shore to shore.

Shackleton's story really is amazing, and he and his crew made it because they were clinging to hope and waiting for rescue from their dilemma. After being lost for months and given up for dead, they camped on an ice floe, and waited for the ice to break up in the summer so they could drift north on the current. Their destination was Elephant Island, an uninhabited speck of rock and ice, where the crew thought they might be able to survive the winter.

One of the passages that Big read to her from *Endurance* was this one: "Toward three a.m., the wind began to fall, and by five o'clock it had dropped to a gentle breeze. Gradually the sea grew calmer. The sky was clear, and finally the sun rose in unforgettable brilliance through a pink mist along the horizon, which soon melted into flaming gold. It was more than just a sunrise. It seemed to flood into their souls, rekindling the life within them. They watched the growing light quenching the wild, dark misery of the night that now, at last, was over." And in the new light, they were able to see the outline of Elephant Island.

Shackleton's story inspired Jerri Nielsen to go through the darkness of her night and once again come to the light, and I believe that you and I can do the same. The reason we can? It's exactly what our Bible passage says: "I will not be afraid, God, for you are with me." That's the entire secret to making it through the dark valley, the deep darkness of our lives: God is with us. We are not alone.

You see, the darkness we sometimes inhabit is not intended to be our permanent lodging place. It is not our permanent home, but it is where we sometimes live for a period of time in the course of life. Kushner says, "Human beings are not fashioned to live in darkness. Even as our eyes require light, even as our bodies require

sunshine, our souls need companionship, laughter, a sense of purpose." God is not with us to protect us from the pain and loss that we inevitably experience in the process of living our lives, but God is with us to keep us from letting only that pain and loss define our lives. We're not intended by God to live in the darkness of a valley for life, but to walk through it, and to come out on the other side, finding life because God is with us.

That's the hope that our faith offers us; that's the promise God has made and keeps with us—that we are to live in the light, live in today. Mort Crim says that we're not to stay stuck in past losses and pain, but to live today. He writes: "We are to seal ourselves inside an airtight box called *today*. But if we're in an airtight box, what can we breathe? The answer is hope. It's oxygen for the soul." Hope, looking for a new day, knowing we will go through the dark valley—that's a gift from God.

Father James Keller wrote some words about hope and I'd like to share some of them with you.

Hope opens doors where despair closes them.

Hope draws its power from a deep trust in God and the basic goodness of human nature.

Hope lights a candle instead of cursing the darkness.

Hope pushes ahead when it would be easy to quit.

I'm convinced that each of us can say, "Even though I go through the deepest darkness, you are with me, God." God is lighting the candle of hope to help us through the darkness into the light.

Closing:

The poet Kahlil Gibran wrote these words: "In every winter's heart there is a quivering spring, and behind the veil of each night there is a smiling dawn."

A leave here this morning, I hope and pray that within each of our souls, there is the hope of a "smiling dawn." Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

