



Date: July 9, 2017

Title: "Then, Suddenly, He Was Gone"

Scripture: Psalm 23; Romans 8:35-39

Description: Trying to grasp the sudden death of a beloved church member, this sermon attempts to express thoughts about grief and hope.

"Hellooo!", I hollered, waving my arms, but they were too far away to hear me, or too far away for me to see if they were waving and hello-ing in return. On a five-day solo hike in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho, I had made camp in a clearing by a lake when I spotted a tent and two campers on the opposite shore. "Hellooo!", I hollered, so eager for company that a one-word exchange would have qualified as scintillating dinner conversation. But the only reply was my own hello echoing back. And it was evening and it was morning the third day.

The sun had burned away the frost the next morning when another solo hiker surprised me, standing only a few steps away. I had been engrossed in studying my map, unsure where I was exactly. (I stayed pretty much unsure of where I was the entire trip.) "Oh, hey!" I greeted. "Is the Bear Creek Pass trail up ahead?" "Yeah," he assured me, "about a half a mile. Does this trail lead to State Rd #38?" "Yep, but it's a good day and a half hike," I answered. This was my human interaction for that 24 hour span. And it was morning and it was evening the fourth day.

I hadn't intended to be that alone for that long. I had been invited to do a wedding in Boise and had heard of the Sawtooth Range, so why not hike a week before the nuptials? So I planned the hike and booked the flight...and couldn't get anybody to hike with me. That's why it was a five-day solo: I hadn't intended to be Tom Hanks in *Castaway*. (Besides, he had Wilson.) This wasn't meant to be a spiritual walking on hot coals test; I just wanted to hike and it turned out to be a solo hike.

It turned out to be much more than that. It turned out that being abandoned and left all alone was my life-long great struggle. Single in those days, I was a big boy. I could stay nights in the house with only my dog, I could dine alone at the kitchen table in perfect comfort. But all my life I feared not that you would hurt me or be angry with me, but that you might leave me and I would be alone and abandoned. It turned out that a five-day solo hike in the mountains was more than I expected...and just what I needed.

By late afternoon, I would arrive at a place that seemed far enough for a day's hiking and beautiful enough for the night, so I would make camp. Pitch tent,

gather firewood, hang provisions, done. Then the dread began, circling me like a pack of wolves. "I am so alone. I have four hours until dark when I can go to sleep, and I am so alone. What am I going to do?" In minutes the isolation became physical in my stomach and in my breathing. "It's too late to pack up and hike out...what if it keeps getting worse? Why did I come here? How am I going to endure this?"

I don't recall what I did next. Read a book, explored the near-by creek, sang every stanza of Rocky Top. I do remember later, sitting by the campfire watching the moon rise, thinking, "This is a beautiful place! I am so filled with peace. It is good to be here." As intense as it felt, my loneliness was always temporary. It does not grow in an unrelenting spiral; it ebbs and flows like a wave. The pain was the weather, sometimes raging as a fierce thunderstorm; but the goodness and God's constant grace was the climate. However fierce the moment's weather, the climate would return.

A second thing I learned: the way to overcome my fear of being alone was not through having enough good friends or finding one true love; the way to address my fear of being alone was by being alone.

Fear turns out to be the main thing. Almost every one of us is afraid of being alone, of dying, of failure, of something. It's our fear of these things, not the things themselves that causes many of our problems. We can't handle the fear, so we try all kinds of bypass routes, including, but not limited to drugs, alcohol, shopping, hours in front of the computer, or my personal favorite—just staying impossibly busy. We hide behind our tasks and projects and to-do lists and there is no life in them. Loneliness and sadness do not sink a person; the energy a person spends trying to avoid them does that. But still it is so hard to stop, because if you stop, you might fall into a deep, deep hole. Which the Psalms call "the pit."

It's when you are in the pit, not when you are frantically trying to avoid the pit or pretending the pit is merely a temporary dip in the road, when you face the thing that is too hard to face, when you are in deep trouble and can't get yourself out, that's when Jesus comes to you and says, "Cast your cares upon me..." and not in a shallow, greeting-card way. When you stop trying to hide your fear and your sadness and let it teach you instead, that's when the precious Lord takes your hand and leads you on, lets you stand.

This will not come from God through a deep grandfatherly voice or directions like an LED-lit airplane aisle at your feet guiding you to the nearest exit. It will not be what you expect or pray for; it will not be what you ordered from the menu. You will get a miracle. It may come so slowly that a graph of your healing will look like the side view of a topo map of Kansas, but slowly the large hurt inside shrinks into a small one. And the small one changes from a lump of coal into a diamond. It becomes, miraculously, a gift from God.

Perhaps your miracle will come in the form of a tender brown-eyed Jew who won't provide answers or heal all the wounds, but will say, "Cast your cares upon me..." Then he may ask you to do something kind for someone, even if that someone is you. He will sit with you, even as your tears flow. You will find your hands being held in the hands of God, which is what you have wanted all your life. To know that God's mothering hands hold your life, like a baby. That is so not you, not us—strong, competent, productive us—being held like a baby. That is so not us, and it is really all that we have ever wanted.

"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me..." (Psalm 23:4) Two key words: *though* and *through*.

*Though* I walk through the valley...not *if*. Life is hard as nails. Sometimes life *is* nails. "Creation groans," says Romans. Life is not simple, something that can be mastered by a handful of principles, even when the principles are biblical ones. Jesus made it clear that unless a seed is buried and broken open by soil and rain, it cannot grow. No brokenness, no growth.

"Though I walk through the valley..." The second important word is *through*. The valley of the shadows is something we go *through*. Valleys are not where we settle down but where we camp; they are not where we set up housekeeping, but where we hang out for a while. Resurrection happens. It is a miracle. It is a gift. And it comes from God.

I want to offer something to as many people as I can, but for the next minute or so, I need to speak to one specific individual who is present this morning. After a long illness, Tom Reynolds died suddenly last October. His son, Tim, died suddenly last Monday. Gone. Yet many of us still feel their presence this morning when we came here. So this is as good a place as any to say it:

Tim, we have just begun to miss you. The world is less shiny and less warm than it was with you around. We miss you. Doreen and your family are bereft with grief. Doreen is so wounded, so broken. Yet she is so strong. She is determined to work through it, not run from it. She walks through the valley of the shadow of death rather than accepting the by-pass alternate routes. Tim, in your living you added warmth and cheer to our lives, just like your father; in your dying you will add wisdom and strength to our lives, just like your father.

We know from experience that a very sweet man can be taken suddenly away and that we will be called to survive unsurvivable losses. Bearing our grief together, we will grow closer to each other because we *need* each other. Then, because we have walked in darkness, we will grow more confident in the light that darkness cannot overcome.

We miss you already. When you died, a little bit of each of us died as well. But we believe the promise, we have become more deeply alive. Thank you, Tim, for that gift you and God's steadfast love have granted. That's all I have to say to you for now, Tim. If you will excuse me, I need to speak to my congregation for a moment.

There are three great truths: we can be so ruined; we are in control of so little; we are so loved. The first two truths are so hard that we do not want to think about them. But *not thinking about them does not make them go away*. As hard as they are, these truths are the path that leads us to the third truth. We can be so ruined; we are in control of so little; *we are so loved*. When you grasp that you are so loved, so deeply, steadfastly, constantly loved, you are ten feet tall and bullet-proof. Amen.

*Help, Thanks, Wow*, by Ann Lamotte, published in 2012, was the source of much of this sermon.