Sunday, May 6, 2001
THINGS TO REMEMBER
Psalm 23

I stood at the bedside of a dying woman. We both knew that she would not live more than a few hours. She was 93 years old. I had visited her many times and we often talked about the most important things we had learned in life, the little and big truths that had guided us, the things to remember — some were humorous and others more serious.

We each had our favorites. Here are some of mine, and very few, if any, are our original creations. They are part of that larger pool of human wisdom.

“It’s not what you have in your life, but who you have in your life that counts.”

“Do not compare yourself to the best others can do, but to the best you can do.”

“You can do something in an instant that will give you a heartache for life.”

“You should always leave loved ones with loving words.”

“No matter how hot and steamy a relationship is at first, the passion fades and there had better be something else to take its place.”

“Money is a lousy way to keep score.”

“Just because someone doesn’t love you the way you want them to doesn’t mean they don’t love you at all.”

“The trouble with a rat race is that even if you win, you’re still a rat.”

“Never fit a square peg into a round hole.”

“Murphy’s law was not propounded by Murphy, but by another person of the same name.”

“Remember the compliments you receive. Forget the insults. If you succeed in doing this, tell me how.”

“Things in life do not have to be perfect to be good.”

“Two people can look at the exact same thing and see something totally different.”

“You can never outrun God.”

On this particular visit, she said something she had not said before. I don’t remember her exact words, but it went something like this, and it is worth remembering:

“There have been many times in my life, especially when I was much younger, when I felt that I had done so many things wrong, I figured God had given up on me. But as I’ve grown older, and especially since I’ve been here in the hospital, I have more and more experienced God’s presence. When I was young, I thought I had to be perfect for people to love me. I thought that

if I ever did something wrong, their love would be withdrawn. So every time I did something wrong, I would make excuses. I would lie. I would try to find someone else to blame. I didn't realize what an unpleasant person I became when I acted that way. But I've finally learned that you don't have to be perfect to be worth loving."

Then she said, "What has helped me more than anything else to remember this are the words of the 23rd Psalm." So, as I held her hands, we recited together the words of that beautiful Psalm, and a few minutes later she died. The 23rd Psalm has never had as much meaning to me as it did that day, and it is something I will always remember.

When I ask family, relatives, and friends of someone who has died if they have any particular Bible passage they want me to read as part of the funeral or memorial service, the 23rd Psalm is mentioned more than any other one.

If you have not done so, I urge you to commit this Psalm to memory so that you can say it any time of day or night, wherever you might be.

Before we look at some of the deeper meanings of that Psalm, here's another story about a man I knew.

I had been visiting this man on a regular basis for about a year. He was confined to his bed and he knew there was no chance of any improvement in his condition. He was 85. Each time I came to visit, we usually started our conversation in the same manner: the health of our families, the activities of mutual friends, how the church was doing, the weather, and, if it was football season, Nebraska football. But when we came to the end of this awkward cheerfulness, he would always ask the same question: "Why am I still here? Of what use am I?"

I often thought about that question because even though I have good health, a vocation to which I am convinced I have been called by God, and much more to look forward to in life, these same questions are on my mind from time to time. Why am I here after all? For what purpose did God create you and me? Maybe you find yourself pondering such questions. Over the weeks and months as this man and I visited with each other, we agreed that the 23rd Psalm was a big help in answering these questions.

To understand how, let's examine the 23rd Psalm in more detail. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." This opening phrase implies that you and I are loved by God and that God provides for our needs. The Bible tells us over and over again that God is love. Love is not love unless it is active. God created us because of love. Whenever and wherever love is in action, there God is present. Therefore, God's overall purpose for your life and mine is for us to live a life of loving one another and a life of loving and caring for God's creation. To put it another way, our purpose for living is to increase among people the love of God and neighbor. Each one of us is a part of God's loving energy. We are an extension of God's love.

Another way of saying the same thing is found in the first question and answer of one of the classic catechisms: "What is the chief end of human beings?" In other words, for what reason are we here? The answer: "To glorify God and enjoy God forever." God is glorified when we love one another. Along with this, we are to enjoy God.

I often wonder, how many people truly and deeply enjoy God? Not just believe in God, but enjoy God? I'm sure there are many people who have never thought of enjoyment and God being connected.

The 23rd Psalm is one of joy. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." People who are always wanting things are usually not very joyful people. They think they will be happy if they have more and more stuff. But when you enjoy God, your wanting is decreased.

Sometimes we Christians tend to be too grim and overly serious in our religious faith. Too often going to church and experiencing the presence of God is thought of as being a burden and as boring, stern, and dull, even painful. I've met people who claim to be very religious and yet have given me the impression that their religious faith has taken the joy out of life, rather than helping them to enjoy life.

Nowhere did Jesus say, "I have come to bring misery," or "I have come to make you miserable." Nowhere in the Bible is it said or implied that your religious faith should be a burden. Rather, he said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." In another place, he said, "Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." "Come to me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

If creation is a blessing, as our faith says it is, then our proper response is to enjoy it. Pleasure of this kind is one of the deepest spiritual experiences. But this kind of pleasure does not always come easily when our main emphasis is wanting and stressing our sin and unworthiness.

God's invitation is a call to delight in God's creation, to learn the art of savoring. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." To savor is to enjoy something for itself, for its intrinsic worth. It is to contemplate, to adore, to take pleasure in. To savor is to appreciate, to be grateful, rather than to appraise. Far too often our only question or concern in looking at something is, "What's it worth?" rather than enjoying it for what it is.

Someone said, "Too often we Christians give the impression that God's presence is about as welcome as a State Trooper when you're doing 80 on the interstate. The Bible becomes a rule book and the church a traffic court, where guilty offenders gather to be sentenced and pay their fines."

I've always admired our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith because they seem to know how to enjoy God more than many Christians. Listen to some of the Psalms in addition to the 23rd:

"I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you." (Psalm 9:1-2)

"I was glad (filled with joy) when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" (Psalm 122:1)

"This is the day that God has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:24)

Throughout his teachings as recorded in the New Testament, Jesus frequently used the metaphor of a joyous feast or banquet to describe the reign of God. And that's what the sheep

in the 23rd Psalm experience from the shepherd — a joyous banquet. “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.”

There’s another side to the 23rd Psalm. We know that life is not all pleasure and joy. We all have dark valleys to walk through. This Psalm helps us remember that God is there with us also. As a minister, I work with many people who are in dark valleys. Some because a loved one has died. Others because they are enduring suffering and know that death is not far away. Like everyone else, I’ve had my own dark valleys to walk through, and I’m sure I’ll have many more.

Sometimes I see people who are in grief wanting to stay too long in the valley of the shadow of death, and they need to remember that the 23rd Psalm says that God walks with them through the valley and leads them out of it back into the sunshine. Remember, our losses are painful because life is good and precious.

People frequently ask, “Where is God when people are tortured and murdered?” It helps me to remember, as Rabbi Kushner put it, “God is found in the courage of the human soul to stand up for human dignity, no matter what the odds, so that no matter how poor, no matter how uneducated or how badly outnumbered, people are willing to risk their lives for the sake of justice.”

God is in the power and courage of people who say, “I may die in the attempt, but I will die one day anyway, so I might as well spend my life in the service of something I believe in.”

God is not found only in what we see as happy endings. God does not guarantee that you will survive or even that the side of justice will win sometime soon. God does promise that if you die on behalf of justice and mercy, your sacrifice will not have been in vain. Some problems are too grave to be solved in one lifetime. It is God who links one lifetime to another, who joins one heroic act to the next.

Natan Sharansky was a Jewish activist imprisoned by the former Soviet government for many years. Despite the efforts of his captors to break his spirit, he survived his sentence and came out of prison stronger than when he went in. He said that he did this by constantly reminding himself that the power of God he relied on was greater than the power of those who kept him in prison.

God did not open the doors of his prison cell, but God did keep him free in spirit wherever he was. When he was finally released and permitted to go to Israel, where he still resides with his family, he told his story in an autobiography and chose for its title a phrase from the 23rd Psalm, “Fear No Evil.” He said he had memorized that Psalm, and he would recite it to himself over and over again when things were the most difficult. Remember, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” Amen.