



# Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Lockett Currie

## **FOR THOU ART WITH ME**

**Sermon for April 4, 2011**

**Scripture: Psalm 23 and John 9: 1-3, 13-17. 29-38**

**Where are you God? Have you ever raised this cry to the universe? Whether it be personal crises or a tragedy on the scale of Japan's earthquake/tsunami or our country's 9/11 terrorist attacks, there can be a feeling that God is absent from our world. Now there are probably in this congregation several people of such strong faith, that such a question would not be ever lifted up; yet, for most of us, myself included, there are many times that we cry out to God, "Where are you? Why is this happening? How can you be a loving God and allow your people to suffer like this?"**

**In the Johannine community from which today's gospel lesson comes, I can imagine that they too had similar questions. In those days the Jewish faith was being bombarded by these apostles of Jesus, these people called Christians by some. Many of the Jews were beginning to wonder /or believe that Jesus was the Messiah. The Pharisees, the leaders of the Jewish faith, were not appreciating Jesus. Whether because of jealousy or because of the strength of their own beliefs, they kept challenging both Jesus' words and actions. In the case of the blind beggar that receives his sight, the Pharisees condemned Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. In this community, people who were suspected of believing that Jesus was the Messiah were expelled from the synagogue. This expulsion was a very serious matter as it could lead to persecution and even death.**

**What happens to someone who is touched and changed by Jesus? If you are familiar with those examples on TV, we usually hear about how everything is so much better now. In the case of our blind beggar, that is not true. "He got healed and his neighbors no longer knew him. His parents disowned him. And he was kicked out of the**



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church.<sup>1</sup> If he'd given a testimony it might have been, 'Yes, I was healed by Jesus and my life turned into a mess. People I'd known for a long time acted as if they didn't know me, my family didn't want anything to do with me, and the authorities threatened to arrest me.'<sup>2</sup> Anthony Robinson says that 'being touched and blessed by Jesus may not mean our lives are suddenly successful, as society defines success. Jesus may make life harder, but in ways that matter.'

Seeing is used by Jesus as a metaphor for believing. I wonder if any of us might be blind to some hidden truth that we need to see in our own life as well as in the life of our congregation. In terms of this congregation, we might have continued on doing what we have always done and kept losing members. That kind of blindness might have led to the closing of this beloved, historic church. Instead, this church's leadership decided to spend this year revisioning the purpose and priorities of this church today with a hoped for result of us being more vital in the communities from which we draw our support. I know that many of us felt that God was hearing our prayers for this church when several new people, including Sara and Bob Carter, today's new members, began to come regularly and express interest in joining. Jesus can remove our blindness both physically and spiritually and then we can say with the beggar, "I was blind, but now I see."

In Psalm 23, King David tells us that God is our shepherd. If we truly believe the words of this Psalm then we shall not want because we will know that God is with us. This Psalm 23, most often used at funeral's is really more about life than death. This beloved Psalm is probably known by more people.

There are two main types of psalms, those of complaint and those of celebration. Psalm 23 like other celebration psalms uses a feast to convey God's goodness and power, that same goodness and power that Christians experience in Jesus. The table is central

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Robinson from Still Speaking Daily Devotions, online, April 2, 2011.



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to a feast, the table laden with all kinds of delicacies: “thou preparest a table before me...my cup runneth over.” This imagery leads me to envision the Lord’s table where we celebrate holy communion, one of those holy places for me where I am reassured of God’s love and faithfulness, knowing that I am not alone. Even if we have major problems, God is there with us. There’s no one that does not walk through the valley of the shadow of death, whether that means the end of life or the things in life that sap life out of us. But did you hear the Psalmist: I fear no evil for thou art with me. Last week I used a favorite expression in prayer: God gives us minimum protection and maximum support. This expression comes from Wm. Sloane Coffin when his 24 year old son died in an accident. He wrote to his parishioners at Riverside Church, “You gave me what God gives all of us—minimum protection and maximum support.” None of us is immune from life’s difficulties yet the one thing I am sure of at this point in my life is that God loves me and you and is there with us, even when it’s hard for us to find God.

Another promise in Psalm 23 is that “I shall not want” or a better translation of the Hebrew would be “I shall lack no good thing.” Whatever could that mean? I lack that house on the ocean; I lack an iPad and so forth. In reality I am not one who wants lots of material things; however, I do yearn deeply for warm, sunny weather; I yearn for family and dearest friends to be close enough and available to come for Sunday dinner. I think it is okay to yearn. Yet what is that one good thing that I would really want at the end of life on earth? Remember Jesus talking to the rich man that wanted eternal life. He had so much but the one thing Jesus said he needed to do (give away all of his possessions), he could not do. At the end of life, the one thing I would not want to lack is the love and intimacy with God.

At the beginning of this sermon I raised up some of those questions that most of us have when crises and tragedies come. When Bad Things Happen to Good People by



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**Rabbi Kushner was the first book that helped me make sense of the horrible things that happen. He wrote this book after his 14 year old son died from an incurable disease. Kushner was interviewed by one of our church's former summer people, Robert Abernathy, after 9/11 happened. Kushner says, "God's promise was never that life would be fair. God's promise was, when it's your turn to confront the unfairness of life, no matter how hard it is, you'll be able to handle it, because He'll be on your side. He will give you the strength you need to find your way through." He continues to say, "Some things happen in the world that God does not want to happen, God is good, Nature is not good, Nature is blind, Nature is amoral. Fire burns and bullets wound and falling rocks injure and disease germs infect everybody, whether you deserve it or not."**

**Yes, some of us get stuck in the "valley of the shadows" and don't know how to find our way out. Kushner says that is God's role. The role of God is not to explain and not to justify but to comfort, to find people when they are living in darkness, take them by the hand, and show them how to find their way into the sunlight again. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me..."**

**Remember that no matter how depleted we feel, God is there to provide strength and comfort. The Psalmist says, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Another translation is even stronger: "God's loving kindness pursues me all the days of my life." No matter who you are or where you are on the journey, God is actively longing for you; God is actively seeking you. Do you hear God's call?**

**"You will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." A God who comforts us, yearns for us, nurtures us, pursues us in this life, will surely not abandon us in the life to come.**



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**We will be at the banquet table, knowing fully that God is with us always. Please help me close by reciting the King James Version of Psalm 23 as found in your bulletin:**

**<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. <sup>2</sup>He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. <sup>3</sup>He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. <sup>4</sup>Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. <sup>5</sup>Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. <sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. Bless each of you as we continue our journey together living with God's promises and helping one another. Amen and Amen**