

"Thou Art With Me" -- Psalm 23:4

30 November Anno Domini 2001

Sermon for the Funeral of

LaVerne A. Piepkorn

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Emmett, Idaho

Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Dear Dee and all the family members of LaVerne, as well as all of his friends, neighbors and fellow members of Our Redeemer congregation ...

Being with a family member ... whether it be a husband, a dad, a grandfather, a brother, an uncle ... being with one whose body is wasting away over the period of months and years is both a difficult vigil and an honored privilege. Visiting such a friend, or coming to see a neighbor, or stopping by to talk with a member of the congregation, or sitting beside the deathbed of a parishioner who is slowly being consumed by a hideous disease is both sobering and uplifting.

Those who have been with, spoken to and listened to LaVerne Piepkorn bear witness to this truth by the nature and number of the tears that have and are flowing. For though there certainly are sufficient tears of sadness stinging the eyes, there are many, many more tears of gladness that overflow. The reason is that LaVerne knew that the LORD knew him and LaVerne knew that the LORD was with him. This faithful man knew, not just with his head, but also in his Christ-cleansed heart, that "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8).

A couple of months ago, I sat at his bedside and we talked about this very service that he anticipated taking place. He wanted to make certain that you heard a sermon that spoke of the hope that the Christian has in this life and that, even though this pilgrimage is often one filled with hurts and pains, the Lord will not abandon His own. Rather, the LORD God will graciously be with the Christian always, and when that one day comes, will take His own to be with Him in the Paradise of Heaven forever.

That is the message that LaVern desired for you to hear this day and from his deathbed he told me that he wanted the sermon for his funeral service to be based on a part of the 23rd Psalm. Therefore, please listen to that portion of God's Word under the theme of ...

... "Thou art with me."

"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

That there is death, we ought to have no doubts. Or do you not believe what the Lord declares in His Word, the Bible? "As sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death

spread to all men because all men sinned" (Romans 5:12). Or do you not believe what your conscience tells you that you have not lived up to the requirements of God's holy, perfect Law and that your sins of deeds, of words, and even of thoughts have separated you from being with the Lord, disqualified you from a place in Paradise, and earned you eternal death. Or do you not believe what God's Word declares? "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). But there may be some who reject God's Word and doubt their sin and deny the guilty conscience. Well, do you not believe what you behold here? Reject this casket. Doubt this death. Deny your being here today.

That, of course, is not what LaVerne did. He knew that death was real. He understood quite clearly that his mortal remains would be placed in a metal box and an earthen grave. He understood what sin was. He confessed that he had sinned against God in thought, word and deed. He knew that he was, by nature, a sinner. He also confessed this with mouth: "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

How could LaVerne say this? In order to discover the answer to that question we must understand a bit more about the One true God. Because He has revealed it in His Word, there can be no denying that the LORD God is holy and without sin, righteous and without blemish, just and without exception. Along with these truths, it is also true that the Almighty God is merciful in that He doesn't give the world what it deserves ... Jehovah is gracious in that He gives the world what it doesn't deserve ... the LORD is benevolent in that He set about not only to be the world's Judge but also the world's Savior, and if the world's Savior, then yours as well.

God the Son came into this world, not to show us how to save ourselves, but to take upon Himself the sentence of God's wrath. Jesus was Incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. That is what Christmas is all about, that God is with us so we may say, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." Christ was not born to condemn the world, and that includes you, but rather, to take upon Himself the penalty of all sins of all people, and that includes yours. That is what Good Friday is all about ... God dying for you at that time, so that you might be able, as LaVerne was enabled, to say, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

Please understand that there is an eternity of difference between walking through the valley of death and walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus went through the valley of death when He suffered for you during the darkness of the cross, when He was forsaken for you at the Place of the Skull, when He died the death you deserved that you might be given the Life that He earned for you. Is it any wonder that Jesus is our Redeemer? Three days later Jesus rose from the dead, and in doing so, the evil one was defeated and death has lost its sting. That is what Easter is all about ... God rising from the dead for you.

Christ journeyed through the valley of death alone, for you, in order that you might never be separated from Him ever. His Body was placed into a rock-hewn tomb, for you, in order to sanctify the graves of His own. He rose again in order that you might be born again in Holy Baptism. Jesus did all this in order that He might be with you as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death and be able to say, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

The LORD became LaVerne's Shepherd at the age of two when, on September 25, 1931, He led the

lad beside the still waters of Baptism and restored his soul, for Baptism is not our work, but God's gracious gift. LaVerne was given the faith whereby, even as a toddler, he could walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil, for the LORD was with him. On July 30, 1944, at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Stanley, North Dakota, he confirmed the Christian faith of the Apostles' Creed which we confessed a few moments ago, acknowledging that "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

On December 3, 1965 he and Dee were married. Together, this trio ... LaVerne, Dee and the LORD, has journeyed here on this earth. LaVerne and Dee have traveled in the light of God's Presence even when they walked through various shadows of death. For surely the loss of a son is such a shadow of death, as are many of the afflictions of body, mind, heart and soul that befall us. In the midst of such shadows the LORD was with them and even fed them with Himself just as He promised. Thus, they came to the Lord's Supper for each could say, "Thou preparest a Table before me in the presence of mine enemies." It was less than two months ago that LaVerne entered the holy place at Our Redeemer and I, along with many in the congregation, beheld a 90-pound man whose God drew him to be in the Divine Service and receive the Body and Blood of Christ at the Holy Communion.

And when he was no longer able to leave his room and come to Church, he requested that the LORD's Table be prepared before him at his bedside. Once again, God's Gift of Himself, His Body given and His Blood shed for LaVerne for the forgiveness of his sins, was received in the midst of the shadow of death.

And on Monday, when he was no longer able to eat and drink, LaVerne heard the Word of God's promise in the Liturgy of the Lord. He heard the Invocation, that is, the Word concerning His Baptism ... He heard the Word of the Absolution, that is, the LORD's Word of forgiveness announced to him "in the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Ghost" ... He heard the Word of the LORD's abiding Presence in the 23rd Psalm ... He heard "Nunc Dimittis", that is, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy Word," ... He heard the Benediction, that is, "The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make His face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace."

Two hours later, LaVerne departed in peace and was with the LORD in Paradise. He who had faithfully declared during his days in this life, "yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me," suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, beheld the reality of "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." He left this vale of tears and this valley of the shadow of death because he was called home where there are no more tears (Revelation 7:17) and where there is "no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb ... and there shall be no night there "(Rev. 21:23 & 25). Cancer is such a shadow of death, but it is not Death itself. Truly this day, LaVerne A. Piepkorn is alive and well, while the cancer is dead and gone.

This, dearly beloved, is what LaVerne wanted you to hear this day. Why? So that you might be able, despite the shadow and the valley, to say to the LORD in the faith that God grants, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." Why? So that you might be one of those who are, one day ... any day ... maybe even this day, called home by Christ and be with LaVerne once again. May God, in His mercy and grace, grant it to each of us. Amen.