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Preaching: Rev. Sue Verboom

Psalm 23

“Wherever you go, there you are!”

In the ancient world, much of the earth’s surface was unexplored, unknown, and unmapped. Mapmakers symbolized those regions by drawings of dragons, monsters, and huge fish. The message was clear: uncharted territories were frightening, fearsome places. Terrors lay buried there. But, as many maps declared, “There be treasures” as well.

The commander of a battalion of Roman soldiers was once caught up in a battle that took him into territory the mapmakers represented with monsters. Not knowing whether to forge ahead into the unknown, or turn back where they came from, he dispatched a messenger with an urgent request: “Please send new orders. We have marched off the map.”

Rev. Leonard Sweet suggests this ancient story could symbolize our present age. Although we have mapped and charted every corner of our planet, many aspects of our human experience are brand new.

- We have a higher population than the earth has ever known.
- The human impact on our environment is greater than ever before.
- Ethical dilemmas abound, due to technological and medical advancement.
- Items we purchase are almost instantly obsolete.

WE ARE MARCHING OFF THE MAP EVERY DAY!

Apart from situations unique to the present time, ALL human beings share the universal experience of marching into uncharted territory as they move through the stages and passages of life.

We experience growing up. We have to take on more responsibility for ourselves. We move out of the family home, deal with rent, utilities, grocery bills. We face new school situations; new job situations. We may have to handle illnesses, injuries,

surgeries. We may battle alcohol or drug dependencies, or watch people we love grapple with these things. We may lose very significant people in our lives, through estrangement, divorce, death- or just through something as simple as moving away.

WE ARE MARCHING OFF THE MAP EVERY DAY!

How do we find our way? Psalm Twenty- Three can help.

How do we manage uncharted territory, never-tasted experiences? We can zero in on two little words in this Psalm, which sum up the help and power we are given in this Scripture. The two words are “though” and “through”.

Two simple words: Though. Through. We often misspell them. Spellcheck won't pick them up, because they are both correct spellings of a given word in the English language. “Though” becomes “through” with the addition of one little letter: “R”. Psalm 23 teaches that God will give us that “R”, changing our “though”s into “through”s.

Psalm 23 lays the truth out plainly for all to see: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” it says. Not “IF” I walk through such a valley. No. “THOUGH” I walk through that valley, God will bring me through.

There is a saying in AA: “You alone can do it; but you can't do it alone.” We can't go around the valley. We can't get someone else to go through it for us. But the presence, guidance, help, strength and power of God will bring us through.

A friend of mine has a sweatshirt that I love. It shows a smiling little person in the midst of a beautiful wood, where a rainbow gleams in the sky. “Always remember,” it says, “wherever you go, there you are!”

There are two ways I understand this message.

First, this is a powerful word of comfort. Some experiences in my life have been hard enough that I've really been afraid. Deep inside, I guess I've wondered if they might crush me, even destroy me. But this sweatshirt reminds me of the promises of God: NOTHING can destroy my life. My life in Christ, my BEING is safe. No matter what happens, where the road of life takes me, where I march off the map into uncharted territories, I will still be me: whole, intact, beloved of God.

A couple weeks back I found great inspiration in the stories of three veterans injured in Iraq, printed in the USA Weekend section of the Kane County Chronicle.

Staff Sergeant Ryan Kelly was a civil affairs specialist helping to rebuild and restore Iraqi plants in need of repair. In July of 2003, his Humvee hit an improvised explosive device. He was blown from his seat, then tried to plant his right leg to get up. He felt

nothing. “I thought the floor of the Humvee had been taken out, but it was still there. That’s when I knew my leg was gone.” After rehabilitation, Kelly biked from Marina delRey Calif. To East Hampton, N. Y. over 58 days. His team, made up of injured vets raised money for Wounded Warrior Project, which provides resources and assistance for other injured vets.

Sergeant First Class Michael McNaughton was a platoon sergeant with a mine-clearing team. In Jan. of 2003, he stepped on a live one, and lost his leg. Again, after rehabilitation, McNaughton found his limitations were not significant. In Jan. of 2005, two years to the day he lost his leg, he ran the Walt Disney World Half Marathon. In March of that same year he ran a full Marathon in New Mexico.

In April 2004, First Lieutenant Melissa Stockwell was running a routine supply convoy with water and meals to troops outside Baghdad. Her Humvee encountered an explosive also and her leg was crushed. After rehabilitation, Stockwell retired from the army and began studies to become a prosthetist at Century College in Minneapolis. Last February she completed a triathlon, in all three events- biking, running and swimming. Her new goal is to make the 2008 U.S. Paralympic swimming team.

These young people’s stories reminded me of Tammy Duckworth, who was injured while piloting a helicopter near Baghdad in November of 2004.

Two weeks after a grenade blew off her legs and shattered her right arm, Army National Guard Major Tammy Duckworth set a goal: to fly again. It’s an ambitious dream; there have only been a handful of amputee pilots in military history. She says she knows of none with an injured right arm.

Tammy, 38 years old, of Hoffman Estates, vigorously pursued rehabilitation at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. She did not dwell on the negative, but focused on the positive:

“After I was hit, everything that I needed to get by was given to me,” she says. “There were literally times when my life was in the balance and I got what I needed.”

“I can sit here and feel sorry for myself all day long, but I’m not a starfish. I’m not going to grow new legs... My friends and comrades put out an incredible effort to save my life. It would dishonor everything they went through.”

Tammy is the granddaughter of people who walked from China to Thailand, as well as the daughter of an Army officer who grew up during the Depression and an immigrant mother from Thailand. She has now moved into the political arena, as she rebuilds her life. Major Duckworth, along with the three young soldiers with similar stories, is an example of a person who has traveled into uncharted territory, who is in

a dark valley that most of us imagine might destroy us--- yet there she is, WHOLE in God's eyes- and in her own.

Jesus taught us, "Where your treasure is, there's where your heart will be." He calls us to pay attention to what's important in our lives- to where we give our precious time, attention and money. When my treasure is where God intends it to be- in my love for God, my love for others and for myself, and in their love for me—then no one can destroy that treasure. No moths, no rust, no thieves, no injuries, no nuclear holocaust—can break in and rob me of that treasure. Wherever I go, I'll be there! And God will be too!

There is something else my friend's sweatshirt gives me: a powerful word of caution. A second friend read the sweatshirt motto. He has a history of alcoholism, and told us the words remind him that he can't RUN AWAY from himself, from his problems, his battles, his valleys of shadow. Because, "no matter where you go, there you are!" The struggles that lie inside you go with you wherever you travel.

The wonderful word of God to us this morning is that BOTH kinds of dark valleys—the ones that come to us from outside ourselves, and the ones that we carry within----
GOD CAN BRING US THROUGH!

Ellen Bergh shares a story:

Amtrak's Coast Starlight train was filled with excited passengers, craning their necks to enjoy the Oregon scenery as the train rolled through green forests. A shining lake gleamed through the trees, and cheerful conversation filled the air. Suddenly, the light, airy feeling was gone, like a candle blown out in a draft as we entered a tunnel. Expecting the sun to reappear quickly, I was uncomfortable as it became even darker. The happy sounds were a thing of the past. Everyone sat in awe of the inky blackness. The longer we traveled in the tunnel, the harder it was to remain calm without any visual clues to reassure us. Even the movement of the train seemed to fall away into pitch darkness. When we came out of the tunnel, laughter and relief filled the compartment. Life in Christ is like that unforgettable train ride. Events may plunge me into darkness where I have no clues to sense the Lord's presence. Yet I can trust God is with me even when I can't see what lies ahead.

THOUGH we travel through dark tunnels, God is with us and promises we will come **THROUGH** them.

We are loved by a God who is with us, wherever we are. A God who loves us, and offers us what we need to be whole, wherever we are! This is good news. Trust it, live it, share it!

This week, look around you. Think about the people in your life—in your family, school, neighborhood, workplace. Is there someone in the midst of a time of darkness? Reach out and speak words of concern and support. Share the gift of time and the gift of listening. God often uses US to carry that little letter “R”- helping someone move from “though” to “through”.

God is with us all. Now and forevermore. Wherever we go, he will preserve us. In this world and beyond. Hallelujah and Amen!