

“HIV, Faith and the 23rd Psalm” by John Hassell



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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

This sermon was delivered based on readings from the 23rd Psalm and from the late Randy Shilts' book, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic*. [The text of the sermon continues below, following the psalm and the excerpt from Randy's book.]

23rd Psalm

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me besides still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths, for his name sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

A reading from *And The Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic* by the late Randy Shilts:

Lourdes, France.

Both Bill Kraus and his friend Sharon Johnson, who was nearing the end of her month-long stay with Bill in France, were lapsed Catholics who traveled in circles in which it wasn't cool to gush about such things as miracles and the Holy Mother of Jesus. That made their first hours in Lourdes uncomfortable, because neither wanted to be the first to admit how awed they were to be there. Both had spent their childhoods in Catholic schools, hearing nuns talk about the Gates of Heaven and the miracles to be found in the grotto where Bernadette saw her vision of the Virgin Mary. Of course they were excited.

When Sharon had suggested the train trip to Lourdes, Bill hadn't broken character. "What the Hell," he said. "I've got nothing to lose."

Even after he stepped off the train, he still didn't want to admit that he did have something to lose and that he, like so many others, was there hoping for a miracle.

Bill and Sharon walked past the basilica and through the square lined with souvenir shops and their bottles of holy water from the grotto. It was off-season, so the usual crowds were gone. Bill scanned the people approaching the grotto. He saw Portuguese housewives who had saved for twenty years for this pilgrimage, and he saw a nun kneeling devoutly, holding her motorcycle helmet. As Bill and Sharon approached the grotto, they passed through the halls adorned with crutches of the cripples cured in years past.

"All these crutches look forty years old," Bill said. "Maybe she stopped curing cripples in 1945."

Bill fell silent when they got to the grotto where water dripped from the spring. Sharon excused herself to wander the grounds. Alone, Bill sat on a stone bench, staring at the statue of the Virgin Mary in the grotto. The words "Jesus" and "God" crossed his thoughts, and he automatically began to push them out of his mind, as he had for many years. As Bill watched the other pilgrims and contemplated the statue, he realized that he would not dismiss the thought of Jesus, as if he were some nuisance. The essence of the Christ figure was living and compassionate, no matter how the message of Jesus may have been corrupted by Christianity.

Bill stared toward the Virgin, and he began to see her as the archetypal mother, not the literal mother of God, but the source of all nourishment and hope. He could speak to that mother, and it would mean something. At last, he could pray, and the words would not be empty.

He realized that the bitterness he had held against the church had alienated him from this elemental source of strength. He had been separated from the font of love and forgiveness that Jesus had to offer, and it was not right. God knew that. It was very clear to Bill now, and for the first time in many years he prayed.

Sharon Johnson relished the serenity of this special place and walked the grounds for hours before she returned to the grotto and saw Bill sitting in the same spot she had left him. She had never seen Bill's face so soft. His anxiety had utterly disappeared and in its place was a tranquility she had rarely witnessed.

The pair decided to attend Mass in the nearby basilica. There however, the spell was broken. The holiness of Lourdes was in the faith of the people, not the rituals of the church.

Night fell as Sharon and Bill left the church and grotto. The winding old streets were dark, and there was nobody to show them the way to their hotel because it was off-season and the shops and restaurants were all closed. It was the enduring image Sharon Johnson kept that day: the two of them lost, wandering confusing streets in the darkness of Lourdes, trying to find their way home.

Good morning. This is my "maiden" sermon at Seekers. I've never been a maiden before. So thank you for this opportunity. And thank you to each of you for the kindness you've extended to me this past year. Rabbi Hirschfield once said that all theology is rooted in biography. Today I'll tell you a little about my journey. Please pray with me as I sing this song:

Beams of Heaven as I go

Through this wilderness below,

Guide my feet in peaceful ways,

turn my midnights into days.

When in the darkness I would grope

Faith always sees a star of hope,

And soon from all life's grief and danger

I shall be free someday
I do not know how long 'twill be,
nor what the future holds for me,
but this I know: if Jesus leads me,
I shall get home someday.

Like many of you, the 23rd Psalm was one of the first passages of scripture I heard, probably before I could even read. Many of you know, I grew up Catholic. But my father was a Southern Baptist. In public schools in the 1960s (we Catholics called them "Protestant" schools), each fifth grade student at Barron Elementary School in Hampton, Va. was given a Gideon New Testament with the Psalms. I still have it. The 23rd Psalm I thought was very pious and for many years, I thought it was rather vapid. To me, the 23rd Psalm seemed like a list of pretty platitudes, green pastures, fluffy sheep, babbling streams, and a blonde blue-eyed Aryan Jesus and not much else.

Fast forward, by the time I was in my 20s, I still thought it was kind of a tired quaint syrupy Psalm, easily memorized, in case I needed to quote scripture.

But then in the 1980s, things changed. I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area, having recently come out as gay, having the time of my life, away from my religious family in Virginia away from my employer's headquarters in Illinois. But I was still trying to reconcile my Christian faith with my same sex attraction as a gay man.

In 1986, Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict the 16th (also known as John Paul II's rottweiler) issued a letter on the pastoral care of homosexuals, saying that I was "intrinsically disordered" and that I have a strong tendency toward an intrinsic moral evil. The same letter evicted

Dignity, an organization of LGBTQ Catholics, from celebrating the Mass in any Catholic parish. This letter was a kick in the teeth, a gut punch, to hear my Mother Church tell me I was no longer welcome in the life of church. I felt cut off from the grace that church offers, like an unwelcome relative in the family that taught me the love of God.

Unknown to me, the grim reaper of AIDS was about to wipe out most of the friends that dragged me out of the closet. I don't know how, but I survived them. Because my friends knew I was still going to Mass on Sundays, even singing in a Catholic Gospel choir, many of them asked me to accompany them as they dealt with the reality of their impending deaths.

Here's where the 23rd Psalm began to have a deeper meaning for me:

"Even though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil..."

A few times, I even asked my fellow choir members to go to their hospice rooms to sing for them, to celebrate their last birthdays, to hold hands around their beds. What led me to make this request? I drew on my faith expressed in Matthew 25, "...when I was sick, you took care of me..." As a child, my parents frequently brought me to the hospital rooms of elderly relatives with whom we would touch and hold in their final days. But these visits were much different. So much stigma hovered over the hospice beds of my friends with HIV. To have a group of mostly African-American women love on them, still brings tears to my eyes today.

I was still going to Mass anyway. "Ignore corporate..." was my way of reconciling the eviction notice from the Vatican.

Again the 23rd Psalm guided me in my journey:

"...You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

The Mass for me was the table that God prepared for me, in spite of that awful hurtful Vatican document.

You might say, well John, just find another church. But back then, through the 70s and early '80s most Christian churches were quite uncomfortable embracing LGBTQ persons. And for me, I was for so many years an altar boy, a eucharistic minister, a choir member, a lay reader, a member of the Third Order of Franciscans, president of the Catholic Student Association at the College of William and Mary. I even led a delegation to the Mass on the Mall in 1979 that John Paul II presided over.

But a remnant of my faith told me what I learned from my upbringing:

'For I am convinced...that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers nor powers nor anything in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord...." (Romans 8:38-39 paraphrased).

It was God's love that sustained me through those terrible years of the AIDS epidemic and my love for the Psalms deepened and grew.

I believe we have a rich treasure of hope in the Hebrew bible. The Good News isn't just in the New Testament. Our Jewish ancestors, my spiritual ancestors, have left us a legacy of hope, especially in the Psalms.

Among the sayings of Jesus in the gospels, there are more quotations from the Psalms than from any other book., according to Denise Dombrowski Hopkins, "Journey through the Psalms".

She wrote that the Psalms give us permission to lament, to complain, to yell at God. Complaining in faith, angry prayers leads us toward greater intimacy with God.

A couple of pages from the 23 Psalm is the 27th Psalm. When

my friends died, being the dramatic gay man that I can sometimes be, I went to Psalm 27, and when I got that phone call, I played Mozart's Requiem, and I recited Psalm 27 and wrote the initials of my friend who died around the margins on that Psalm in this Bible my mother gave me when I was 16. As you can see, I ran out of room. As Marjory Bankson reminded me recently, they are the 'cloud of witnesses' supporting my journey even now.

Parts of that Psalm remind me of those AIDS years from about 1985-2000.

"When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh..." reminds me of the lesions of kaposi sarcoma that would cover the faces and bodies of my friends battling AIDS opportunistic infections.

Another verse that still reminds me of the California ballot measure, Proposition 64, that would have rounded up people living with AIDS and put them in camps:

"Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear. For God will hide me in God's shelter in the day of trouble; God will conceal me under the cover of God's tent; God will set me high upon a rock...."

"If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up..." reminds me of my friend Scott Johnson whose family refused to come to his death bed and refused to attend his funeral. Or Keith McPherson's family who likewise stayed away. But my Catholic Gospel choir never wavered. They sang praises to our God at their homegoing services.

About 1990, I drifted over to the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco in the Castro. It was a pink church, of course! Its former pastor, Rev. Jim Mitulski is still my mentor and friend. Imagine being pastor of a church that between 1985 and 2000 held over 500 AIDS funerals. We sang our hearts out every Sunday, so loud the rafters shook. We even turned the Lord's Prayer into a lament, complaining to God,

“Give us this day, our daily bread, you said you would!” And I prayed for a cure for AIDS. Like the pilgrims who go to Lourdes, I prayed for a miracle to heal my friends. The healing miracles and the cure for HIV never happened. But I was nourished and encouraged by the community as we faced those grim years together. And then one Sunday, one of the pastors told me, God only promises one thing for us: God’s presence.

And so we take to heart, the hopeful promise, the Good News of the 23rd Psalm: “Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.’

As I’ve come to know today now almost a generation away from the AIDS years, Christ is universal. From studying Father Richard Rohr’s book “Universal Christ” I embrace and celebrate the ancient belief that Christ has no beginning and no ending. Christ is eternal, always was, always is and always will be. Jesus, who lived on this Earth only 33 years, is the human embodiment of Christ the Divine. God isn’t up there. God is all around us. In nature, inside each of us, in our community, in the streets, in our flawed institutions, in outer space. We are swimming in God’s presence. I’ve recently rediscovered an ancient 11th century Celtic prayer – called Deer’s Cry or St. Patrick’s Breastplate. I’ll close with it:

I arise today through the strength of heaven

Light of sun, radiance of moon

Splendor of fire, speed of lightning

Swiftness of wind, depth of the sea

Stability of earth, firmness of rock

I arise today through God’s strength to pilot me

God’s eye to look before me

God's wisdom to guide me

God's way to lie before me

God's shield to protect me

From all who shall wish me ill

Afar and a-near

Alone and in a multitude

Against every cruel, merciless power

That may oppose my body and soul

Christ with me, Christ before me

Christ behind me, Christ in me

Christ beneath me, Christ above me

Christ on my right, Christ on my left

Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down

Christ when I arise, Christ to shield me

Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me

Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me

I arise today.

Amen.



