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ECHOES FROM THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

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INTRODUCTION:

I had usually thought of the Valley of the Shadow of Death described in the twenty third Psalm as the experience of death itself. The assurance was that the Good Shepherd, who had provided refreshing in life, guided our paths, protected us from assaults of enemies, comforted and corrected us would also go with us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. It brought encouragement to me and to those with whom I shared it.

During the past decade I have discovered new dimensions to that Psalm. The promise of God about the Valley of the Shadow of Death no longer waits until the end of the way to be claimed. The promise of protection is to me not at the end of the way but in the presence of Death.

We all live with it.....the Shadow of Death. In the energetic activity of our lives, careers, home building, playing and working, we postpone its presence until it comes crashing in on us.

I come to this moment not as an expert on pain with answers about its causes or techniques and formulas for coping with it. What you will hear in the Echoes from the Valley of the Shadow of Death may not include enough of the Hosannahs we have come to expect from victories won and posted. I stagger wounded from the battle with the hoarse cry of one who still weeps through lonely nights in hotel rooms and grapples with the promises of God. Like Jacob at Jabbock I know that if I let go, all is lost. The struggle wrings out the soul. It probes to the deepest dimension of God's question, "What is your name?" "What and who are you?" I sometimes glimpse the glory of the sunrise. Often I limp with the fresh wound of a man crippled from the struggle...."halting on the thigh"...but caught up in the promise of prevailing with God.

I come to share some discoveries in the VALLEY OF THE SHADOW, some deeply disturbing aspects of the journey, some green pastures and still waters discovered in unexpected places, and some deep convictions about the challenges we face as believers in walking with the Shepherd in our contemporary world.

I. ENTERING THE VALLEY

The nightmare began for me with a late night telephone call eight years ago. I was at the Stouffer Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. My day had been frustrating and exhausting as I had sought to persuade a group of denominational bureaucrats to alter the massive budget of the Southern Baptist Convention slightly in order to achieve daily access through cable television to millions of homes. They were not about to do it.

The call was from Colorado Springs. I had just returned from a visit there. Our newest grandson, Bryan had been born to Scott and Lydia. He had been in and out of the hospital for the five months of his life.. Lydia had had another difficult delivery from a trouble plagued pregnancy. Matthew was three. He had also had a premature birth and a great number of complications.

"We've had a call from the blood bank in California. They tell us that some of the blood Lydia received in transfusion during Matthew's birth was contaminated with HIV virus. We've tested. Lydia, Matthew, and Bryan are positive. I tested negative." HIV? What does it mean? "AIDS"

"Should I come." "Not yet. We'll let you know."

The world went into a whirl. I pictured the flaming home of the little boys in Florida who had AIDS by transfusion and were driven from their school and town by the fear crazed behavior of people. A youngster named Ryan White was in lawsuit trying to go to school in the midwest. and OUR FAMILY HAD AIDS.

I flew home to tell Wanda. I still have clearly in mind the ordeal. Something had happened in the household which was fretting her. I sat with her in the living room of our Ft. Worth home and said, "Let me tell you what our problem really is." She listened carefully and calmly. We talked about what we should do. We had walked through many a valley but nothing nearly like this one. Her courage and insight then and all the way through the experience has been awesome to me. Since she had had so many struggles with depression, I was really unprepared for her demonstration of such strength.

AIDS is the curse of yesterday' leprosy. The same fear which drove people to isolate lepers, the same breakdown of body which leprosy did to lives, and the same despair in search for solution characterizes our society's experience with it. It complicates the issue when the element of shame or guilt can be added to justify our frozen attitudes of condemnation.

We are now reaping a harvest of death from AIDS. Cornelius Baker, director of policy for the National Association of People with AIDS, points out that "The only time you see fatality numbers like these is in wartime.....as....this disease is robbing this nation of its future." While accurate figures are difficult to obtain because of the nature of secrecy in the pattern of the victims, Dr. John Ward of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced last week that at least 201,775 adults and 2,615 children have died in our nation of AIDS. The next fourteen months will claim at least 130,000 more lives.

I found out something about statistics. They don't mean anything. They even become a sedative to the conscience of a nation when projections are not accurate and we are "doing better" than we thought. What means something is that each one of those pediatric numbers is a child....bright, inquisitive, quick to laugh, trained not to kiss but saying often "I needa hug"....We're talking about what T. B. Maston called "folks"....people for whom Christ died.

II. TUMULT IN THE VALLEY

Scott and Lydia decided the ethical thing to do was to tell the Pastor and Church where he was a staff minister about the problem. After all Matt had been coming to the children's programs and Bryan had been in the nursery. There might be some need to double check to make sure no HIV virus had been spread to others. That week the Church fired him....with a period of pay...they accepted a "Letter of Resignation" which he had never written.

It was our first taste of the reaction of people to the issue of AIDS in that time period and season....That church failed...It was not to be our last experience like that. Lydia could no longer nurse. Scott could no longer pastor. The decision was made for them to come to our townhouse home in Texas. It was then that we began to learn THE BURDEN OF A SECRET. I had never realized the intensity of that burden. The full impact of trying to tell those with a need to know and yet protect privacy was to create a tension impossible to describe.

Early on we decided that the protection of Matthew for as normal a life as he could have for as long as he had would be the summum bonum...the highest good.. of the situation. It guided all of our actions. I must say it has been a largely successful venture. In the most part this is true because Scott is the best father I have ever known. The time, energy, and love he has invested makes it happen.

Perhaps the best way to describe to you that process is to let Lydia tell it. She did so in an article which came to most of your homes in May of 1987. She wrote it anonymously and changed the description of the sex of her child to a girl rather than a boy. It was published in the Baptist Standard in an article titled "Wearing the Scarlet Letter---AIDS"

"When teaching phonics to my pre-schooler, we started at the beginning of the alphabet. 'This is the letter A.' I said. 'Do you know a word that begins with A.' The poignant reply came, 'A is for AIDS.'

So it is in our lives; A is for AIDS. It is the beginning and ending of every facet of our existence. We are the new untouchables.

I had become infected with the AIDS virus by a blood transfusion while still pregnant with my first child. As a result our baby also contracted the virus. Although I was frequently ill and fatigued, I passed it off as being 'the new mother syndrome.'

Our baby was quite ill as well, requiring weekly trips to the doctor, and I blamed much of my exhaustion on stress. Having no idea that I was carrying the AIDS virus, two years after the birth of my first child, I became pregnant again.

Our second child was premature and also had multiple medical problems. When the new baby was five months old, I received a call from the blood bank that had supplied the blood for my transfusion. They said that the donor who had given the blood for my transfusions had AIDS.

My world started reeling. As soon as I heard the words, all of the events of the past three years came into focus with a searing clarity. The children's inability to stay well; the doctor's frequent head shaking and statements: 'this is rare;' 'the medicine should have worked.'

Within two months I had lost most of what constituted my world. Our baby was in critical condition with days or weeks to live. My husband had lost his job and career when his employer found out that his family had been touched with AIDS. Our older child had to be removed from day care. We were asked not to return to our church. Our confidentiality had been breached and as word spread throughout our community, we quickly fled and relocated in another town. We were too terrified to risk harassment and persecution.

Several months after our move, our baby died and the second phase of my isolation began. This isolation was self imposed, by fear.

The few relationships I have had are superficial and almost totally based on fabrication. How could I truthfully answer simple questions: 'Why did you move here?' 'What was wrong with your baby?' I couldn't talk about the fact that my heart was breaking every time I looked at my little boy. I couldn't share the fact that my marriage was fragmenting from the incredible stress in our lives. I couldn't 'act sick' lest someone get suspicious, so I hid my symptoms and pain.

I didn't dare reveal anything about the severity of our son's illness lest my child be totally ostracized from all socialization. I couldn't even contact former co-workers to explain why I had suddenly disappeared. I was in a new city with no friends, no church, no 'home' (we had left 'home'), no job, a struggling marriage, a very sick child and a grief of our baby who had died. I had never been so alone in my life.

We reached out to a local church. The pastor was supportive but when he asked parents about the possibility of our child attending Sunday School, the parents said no. We do not attend church now. The rejection runs too deep.

To Christians I would say that AIDS cripples not only the body, but the heart. At a time when the AIDS victim is dealing with death and dying, heavy financial burden, physical debilitation, they need support, care and concern--not rejection! If there ever was a time to reach out and touch the 'lepers' of our day, it is now.

I wear the Scarlet A. I keep it well hidden. You may never see me cry or realize from my appearance that I have been infected by the virus. Nevertheless I have

been shattered. I need love, compassion and community to help me make it from day to day. I have done nothing immoral or illegal to contract this disease, but those who HAVE hurt just as deeply as I. Their needs are as great or greater than mine for a compassionate and loving response to AIDS." (end of article)

It was just another page in your state Baptist paper, but it was a shaft in this grandfather's heart.

Lydia is now dead for almost two years. Last week I visited the pediatric AIDS day care center in the this city founded by her and named BRYAN'S HOUSE. Last week more eighty children and families of children devastated by AIDS received there loving, cheerful, and essential support. It is good. It is not enough, but it is an Echo from the Valley...as she being dead yet speaketh.

III. SOME DEEPLY DISTURBING ASPECTS OF THE JOURNEY

1. The Churches as Dysfunctional Families

I grew up in a family committed to starting churches and ministering to needy people. When my Dad and Mother started their ministry, I was eight years old. I had already decided that Jesus was to be Lord in my life. I was nurtured by people who lived that way. My earliest experience was helping start a church in a house near the Little Mexico area of Downtown Dallas. A church had moved out of the neighborhood. The people needed to be spiritually reached. We started with rented house, borrowed chairs, a donated piano, living in the same house the church was to occupy. No one waited on the slow and difficult moving of denominational bureaucracy. The local church was the place in which God did business. Starting with new christians, uninvolved christians, and misfits, I was aware of the frailty of the family of faith. But I also found that it basically functioned with compassion and help. Best of all God was there. Lives were changed. Rescuing the perishing was more than a song we sang.

It was a wonderful matrix out of which was to grow the pastoral phase of my work. When God blessed us with the opportunity of the downtown ministry in the exciting city of San Antonio, I saw a caring congregation reach out to the untouchable. The poorest of the poor were fed daily meals, given free medical help, encouraged to come out of homelessness and irresponsibility into disciplined lives, taught to read, helped out of drugs and prostitution. For every social climber we missed, God gave us similarly skilled and gifted people who came because of what we were. As the church baptized more new converts one year than any congregation in America, it was doing all those risk taking things to function as a family.

But AIDS brought a new challenge and a different response in the churches we encountered as a family. When the children were moved from Colorado to Texas, they began searching for a church for Matthew and for themselves. Battered by their firing from the church in Colorado, they were shell shocked as they dreaded rejection. Find out first. I joined quietly in that effort. In my heart I hoped to find someone who could design a way to bring the energetic three year old into a

group of children in which he could learn about Jesus like other children were doing.

Churches have become places in which the "science of people gathering" has reached new heights. We know now that people must be served in homogeneous fashion, well cared for, comfortable, entertained. The competition is severe. The debt on the building is high. We can't afford to lose anyone over anything. Fear of a deadly disease would panic everyone.

One of the heart breaking aspects of the search was that in some cases pastors conferred with medical doctor members thinking they would find allies in the effort. But no one thousand per cent guarantees were forthcoming. In order to cover their liabilities, the doctors were saying that we don't know enough to be sure something will not turn up that shows the infectious threat is greater than we know.

Eight years ago that supercaution chilled efforts of some to act wisely by doing the risk taking of Jesus of Nazareth as he reached out to touch lepers. The first man of history to voluntarily touch lepers did not die of leprosy. He died at the hands of religious leaders who wouldn't touch a leper on a bet.

My favorite term for church still is Family of Faith. However I have found the family dysfunctional. Our society is filled with dysfunctional families. We know what that is. The design is right. The desire is present. The doing of it has gone tragically awry.

Dysfunctional families have distorted value systems. It often comes from breakdowns of communication between members of the family. They are victimized by the stress of survival needs, the pressure of time consuming activities which keep them away from each other, and the appetites for personal ego needs which are not filled. Families of faith go similarly awry. They miss their mission because words substitute for reality instead of describing it. Success patterns center in allegiance to dynamic human personalities. The church becomes a place in which people are collected rather than the family in which people are nurtured.

Risk taking is difficult for individuals and virtually impossible for groups.. Reinhold Neibuhr caught the heart of the problem years ago as he spoke of Moral Man and Immoral Society. We fail to muster the will to acts as groups by the high standards we can demonstrate as individuals. We have found this to be so.

Individual christians came to rally to us. One left a seminary career to travel across the nation, take up residence nearby, be of help to our AIDS plagued family. People came to give themselves in labor to help furnish a house. Persons contributed money to the salary of the volunteer system which had evolved to support the interfaith aids task force. But when the churches were asked to act, they universally failed to do so.

2. The Difficulty of Loving Past Our Differences

The most explosive of damage to relationships comes with combination of dealing with gays and AIDS. Either of these problems wreck havoc in the heart. Because I take the Bible seriously as the authority for life, there is no way I can discover to justify acting out homosexual behavior. Scriptures pile on scriptures about the intention of God in creation....male and female created He them.

These days serious christians are wrestling with this problem. There is an effort to lighten the load of evidence by attacking the words of scripture and reasoning from the wonder of the love of God that he must have just had to deal with mankind in these terms because we were at an unenlightened stage. There are genetic evidences turning up in scientific studies that some are born with this sexual orientation. This become proof to some bewildered believers that God must have intended this behavior despite the Bible's words. Searching through the mine field of ideas to find principles of fidelity and moderation which apply to all relationships, they try to deal with the homosexual issue by calling for a style of responsible behavior within same gender commitments.

AIDS is no respecter of persons. The virus is transferred through fluid exchange from a diseased person to a healthy one. Blood transfusions are obvious ways of doing it. Injections by needles are effective means of doing it. The greatest publicity and the greatest stigma of the problem of this epidemic, however, is that the means of sexual intercourse in the homosexual behaviour is one in which the virus thrives.

The explosions of fear across the nation are accelerated by the thundering pulpit voices calling it the judgment of God on sinful behavior. "They" deserve it. Blame "them". Religious conventions vote. Study commissions study. The scapegoat is easy to spot. Ten to fifteen percent of our permissive society are written out of the books of humanity. They gather, recoup, and organize to fight back. The louder their voices, the more strident their self defense, the more demanding and off the wall their statements the deeper the problem grows.

Suffocating beneath the load of those hostile and angry encounters, quietly in anguish and pain are the parents and children of faith who are rejected and blamed because sons or daughters are having to cope with sexual desires for their own gender.

I am reminded of the story of comedian Jerry Clower's interview on a Boston radio talk show during the days the nation was debating whether to grant amnesty to those who avoided the draft in protest over the Vietnam war. After a pleasant conversation, the talk show host suddenly told the audience, "When we come back from this break, Jerry will tell us what he thinks of Amnesty." Ninety seconds later, Clower had to answer. His response was a classic...."Now let's see. Are we talking about your boy or my boy. If its your boy, I'd say leave him in that foreign country where he ran. If its my boy, I'd just as soon he came home."

Our son, Skip, is one of the most talented and sensitive human beings I have ever known. Spiritually inclined, musically gifted, high sense of humor, he struggled through adolescence with the purpose of God for his life. I lived through his rebellions and repentances. I was inwardly sure that he would end up serving God in some vocational way. I thought I'd die the day it dawned on me that he was gay. The hellish path he walked was one which drove him to try deception, suicide, and a thousand promises to himself and God. And through it all we loved each other and kept reaching for each other but the chasm was deep.

As an alcoholic, the twelve step program was the instrument of God to help him toward wholeness. He acknowledged his need and moved out of the victim stage to let God move to empower him to take charge of his life. I discovered a new perception of the scripture "He saved others, himself he cannot save." I was part of the problem and could not effect solution. He had to find it on his own.

I am grateful for the respect and love for me which caused him to try to avoid damaging what I sought to be and do. Through conversations and therapies he sought to express his frustrations. Our differences of opinion are deep but we love each other through them. I respect him and love him. He is carving out a meaningful life in helping others. He loves God. He is HIV POSITIVE.

Wanda manages it better than I do. Mothers seem to do that. Our challenge is one of loving each other past our differences. There are those who refuse to let that happen. If you do not accept my lifestyle, you reject me. The secret is that what your behavior is at any given moment may or may not reflect the real you. I have a lifestyle but it is not all of me.

In biblical terms it is the question of whether you can love the sinner and despise the sin. Jesus managed to do that. God does it all the time. To the degree His Spirit indwells us, it can become a pattern of life. Judgementalism is deadly to human relationships. But love goes past that to the heart of the matter. Persons are more than the sum of their parts.

IV. SOME GREEN PASTURES AND STILL WATERS IN THE VALLEY

The Shepherd promises provision, green pastures, still waters, a restored soul, guidance in right ways, the strength of his rod and the correction of his staff, the shield from the blows of enemies (at least at some meal times), an annointed refreshing of the mind, and a thirst slaking cup of sustenance. I come to bear testimony from the Valley that his promises are true.

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

He does it in unexpected ways. A network of friends emerges with life sustaining touch even when they are unaware of what an encouraging word or a genuine prayerful intercession is really meaning.

Some of you in this room have provided green pastures moments of our experience. The twelve step people are not the only ones who have discovered that day at a time living is the survival strategy for the stressed.

I do not know how we could have made this decade without the sensitive and constant response of the Christian Life Commission family. I dare not call names of friends, pastoral colleagues, donors to Mission Service Corps, laypersons who walk supportively beside an exhausted man trying to hold up hands before God in the midst of battle.

And God does it so gently. A call comes from a friend at the moment of acute need. A letter arrives. An opportunity to serve is presented. One of the most deadly traps of this kind of struggle is to make THE DISEASE the center of one's life. God tells us not to Seek First our Survival but to Seek First His Kingdom.

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM IMPROVEMENT OF CHURCH'S AIDS RESPONSE.

One of the sources of refreshing for me lies in the fact that so many churches involved in our experience have altered their pattern and worked out ways to respond to AIDS persons.

One church pastor reported some seventy churches which have secured advice and assistance from their policy and plan. Similar responses are coming. Late but still essential for us to function as families.

A letter from the executive of Woman's Missionary Union this week informed me that this largest organization of christian women in the nation has adopted as their social issue for this year the challenge of AIDS.

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM A BEAUTIFUL ENVIRONMENT FOR SERVICE

I could not complete this thought without telling you how awed we are by the way God has provided one of the most responsive and loving groups of christians we've ever encountered in one of the loveliest spots on the planet. The Big Canoe Chapel in the first of the Appalachian mountains at Big Canoe Georgia is a major factor in our discovery of still waters and green pastures. The beauty of God's creation when you live four thousand feet high on a mountain surrounded by trees and vistas, deer and others of God's creatures, sunrises and sunsets become God's therapy to the soul.

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THE MYSTICAL AND AWESOME PRESENCE

I hesitate to verbalize lest it be construed as claiming more than I experience, but the bottom line of the Shepherd's promise for the Valley of the Shadow is not CIRCUMSTANCE but PRESENCE. And there are times and seasons when the flashes of it provide perspective. Faith is always built on the idea that there is Someone in charge beyond us and that that Someone knows what he is doing.

As far as I know no one in our family has ever asked the question of Job, "Why?" or "Why Us?" Life doesn't come in simple equations.

Why not us? Is not God's strength adequate to carry us through the same trials our fellow human beings are encountering. What is the good of a gospel which works only when sun shines and the living is easy?

Why not us? Stretching our emotional and spiritual muscles to the breaking point is the way they develop. Athletes know it. They do it with their physical muscles deliberatelyeven scientifically....they know that strength comes from struggle. Politicians often know it. A stiff race in a tough competition adds to the triumph and equips them for the next one.

AND THE DIFFERENCE FOR ME IS THE PRESENCE.

V. SOME CHALLENGES TO BE MET

For life to be meaningful, it must be pitched toward future tense. It is not enough for us to examine our wounds except to treat them, to lament our mistakes except to learn from them, to glory in our accomplishments except to draw strength from them. We need to move on. Some challenges for our agenda:

1. PRAY FOR A CURE.

We have often been told by well meaning "prayer warriors" that our child will live.if we pray for him to be an exception. I pray daily for him to live life to the fullest, but the kind of prayer I'm asked to pray is more DENIAL than FAITH for me. I pray for something bigger than that. I pray that the Great Physician will lead to the breakthrough which will bring a cure to this devastating disease.

Is it unthinkable that the intensely concentrated faith driven prayers of millions of believers might be the factor which is catalytic to the breakthrough for a cure for AIDS? We tend to pray casually and spasmodically about such matters. But the "ah hah" moments of scientific breakthrough....the hunches of researchers....and the funding of adequate resources for the research may be enhanced....even created by the effectual, fervent, prayers of the righteous.

2.WORK FOR PREVENTION.

It is controversial because so many object to condom education programs proposed as public policy, but there is no room for christians to hide from the responsibility to work for the prevention of this death dealing disease. A christian strategy is essential in this prevention effort. If it is not to be condoms as a stop gap while ethical ideals of persuasion to abstinence from promiscuous behavior take precedence, we must answer to God for what we have done in the war against AIDS. The recovery of christian idealism in sexual behavior is essential for human well being. Lamenting the efforts of others is no substitute for our own work for prevention.

3. SHARE IDEAS FOR MINISTRY

This T. B. Maston Foundation would be in the spirit and attitude of the man whose name it bears if it set itself for securing the resources to create a Clearing House of Strategies for biblically committed christians and churches to minister to the families and victims of AIDS. Of course such pooled information may exist through various Interfaith efforts and some denominational resources, but many of our churches will profit from a group like this verifying and validating ways christians are finding to minister to the Untouchables.

CONCLUSION

The Psalm concludes with "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." An insurance executive recently reminded me that nothing can follow you unless you are moving. Foraging ahead through the Valley of the Shadow becomes the basis of claiming the promise of goodness and mercy. As I do so, I hope the Echo you hear will be one of Discovery and Joy through whatever the Shadow holds.