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ALWAYS IN ALL WAYS
Matthew 27:16-20

I am fond of Bible promises. I commit them to memory so they are ready when I need them. And this promise from the final verse of Matthew's Gospel has been a favorite of mine since I was in high school. "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

It calls to mind for me that wonderful old prayer from the lips of St. Patrick. Patrick, you remember, was kidnapped from England by Irish raiders, carried to a strange land where he didn't speak the language, and sold into slavery. Years later he escaped and years after that he returned to Ireland as a missionary, preaching Christ to hostile pagans who wished him no good. Patrick learned to pray in the hold of a pirate ship, in the chains of slavery, on the run from enemies, surrounded by an alien people.

Here is part of a prayer that Patrick left behind:

Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left...

What does it mean that Christ is behind us? It means that he is Lord and Savior of all that has gone before. He walks in the dark rooms we pretend are closed, bringing light. He lays gentle hands on our failures, our shames, our regrets. He strides through all the places we have been and all things we have done, and he says, Be healed. Be cleansed. Be forgiven. Be a new creation.

I saw a newspaper story about a guy in Florida whose wife left him after seventeen years of marriage. She moved out and went to live with her parents. Meanwhile the husband, whose name is Larry, admits his wife Marianne had good reasons to leave him, but he wants to try again. Larry has tried to apologize, but without success. Marianne changed her cell phone number so he couldn't reach her. Her parents blocked him from entering their gated community. So Larry sent her five dozen roses to ask forgiveness.

When that didn't do any good, Larry took out a full-page ad in the local paper expressing his regrets, his remorse and his hope for a second chance. If you're wondering, that public apology set Larry back \$17,000. The results? So far, no response from Marianne.

For all I know, Marianne has excellent reasons to ignore Larry. Whatever happened in their past, maybe Marianne just can't get over it. Maybe Larry has had all the second chances he deserves. I don't know.

But what I do know is that there is nothing in your past that can separate you from Christ. Offer him your remorse. Offer to him the wrongs you've suffered, the hurts you've caused, the times you failed, and the times you were too afraid to try. Offer to him every scar, every unhealed wound, every embarrassing secret. Place it all in his hands. Give it away, be done with it, and know that Christ is behind you.

He is also before you, in front of you, leading the way into the uncertainty of tomorrow. Remember the story of the little boy who had memorized the 23rd Psalm and was invited to recite in front of the congregation? The big moment came and the boy froze up. He stepped up to the microphone and said, "The Lord is my Shepherd. And that's all I know." That's enough to know.

The Lord is our Shepherd and we are the sheep of his pasture. You don't drive sheep from behind like cattle. The shepherd goes in front and leads the way. The sheep don't know where they're going. They don't know what's around the bend or on the other side of the valley. And it doesn't matter. Hunger, thirst, pitfalls, hungry predators... It doesn't matter as long as the shepherd is out there in front leading the way.

There's so much to fear in the future, isn't there? We could spend all morning making a list of global problems with no solutions in sight. Then we could catalogue the local problems in our schools and neighborhoods. And that still leaves all the personal uncertainties about family, finances, health, career.

Maybe I'm the pessimistic sort, but I might as well come clean. I think I would be mired in utter despair if it were not for my faith in the Shepherd. I am with you always, says Jesus, and that means tomorrow, too. It means that whatever of good or bad awaits me in the future, Christ is also waiting for me there.

Eli Stanley Jones was a missionary in the back country of India. On one occasion, he got utterly lost and couldn't find his way out of the jungle. Fortunately, he stumbled into a remote village, and one of the locals agreed to lead him out of the bush country. They walked for hours through dense brush hacking their way through unmarked jungle. The missionary began to worry and said, "Are you quite sure this is the way? I don't see a path." The guide turned to him and said, "In this place where there is no trail, I am your path."

The path ahead may not be clear. We may not have any idea what lies ahead, but Christ goes before us. The Lord is my Shepherd, and that's enough for me to know.

Christ before and behind me, Christ at my right and my left... There are a few people in the world who are equally good with both hands, but most of us have a weak hand and a strong hand. A hand that is adept and one that is clumsy. And Christ is there on the right and the left. He is present in our strengths and our weaknesses. He is there cheering us on when we use our gifts to build up God's reign in this world, and he is there comforting and consoling us when our weaknesses get in the way of doing what we wanted to do or becoming what we wanted to be.

In the Bible, right and left sometimes represent all the choices of life, all the decisions we make. Good decisions lead us in God's direction and bad decisions lead elsewhere. But here's the point. Christ is with us no matter what. When we are wise and good, Christ is with us. When we are foolish and misguided, Christ is still with us. At our best and at our worst, Christ remains by our side.

Maybe that's what Isaiah has in mind when he writes: "The Lord, your teacher...he will guide you. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, you will hear a voice saying, 'This is the road! Now follow it.' (Isaiah 30:20-21 Contemporary English Version)

"Lo, I am with you always." Christ before and behind and beside me. Christ beneath me and Christ above me. Let's be clear about this. Christ has plumbed the

deepest hell of suffering for you and me. Christ has ascended to the highest place for you and me.

How does the Psalmist say it? “If I ascend into heaven, you are there. If I lay myself down in the land of the dead, you are there.” In the heights and in the depths, in life and in death, Christ never leaves us.

I remember I used to ride on my father’s shoulders. With his strength beneath me I could see so far, I could reach so high, and it seemed to me that I could go anywhere.

And I remember the day on a construction site when our little puppy fell into a deep posthole. The dog was yelping and I was crying, and my dad lay down on the earth, and pushed his arm into that hole, pressing his cheek against the dirt, stretching, straining, reaching until he had hold of that puppy and lifted him into the light.

Christ beneath us: the certainty and strength on which we stand. And Christ above us: reaching down with mercy, with grace, with love, reaching down to bring us home.

“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Scarcely a dozen words, but those words speak volumes. Christ with us always and in all ways. No nook or cranny where Christ does not shine, no corner of life where Christ does not heal, no place within or without where Christ does not breathe his Spirit.

Everybody feels lonely sometimes. You, me, all of us, but even when we feel lonely, we are not alone. We are never alone. We have the promise of Christ that for a Christian, there is no such thing as alone.

Soli Deo Gloria!