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Always

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Always

James Calvin Schaap

“...for thou art with me...”

Last night we attended a little theatrical performance, sixteen short-short plays tossed together like a good salad maybe, all of them having something, more or less, to do with faith and its practice. I'd say that faith was the dressing maybe, but it wasn't—faith didn't simply spice up the greens; faith was the greens. Punctuating the four acts of the performance were four testimonies, offered by the cast. Four times, individuals stepped to the front of the house, removed his or her black shirt (their only costuming) and spoke, in a white t-shirt, off-text, about their faith.

Two claimed they were believers; two didn't.

It was an odd experience really, because the evening was, therefore, only half theatric. Or was it? Anyone who doubts that testimonies, wherever they're offered, have a theatric component isn't seeing clearly. Where two or three are gathered, there is an audience, and an audience has an effect. Sometimes I found it hard to know what was being said (and what wasn't) for the sake of the audience. But no matter. The evening was real and, often, it was touching. We laughed hard at times, and at others I felt my lips tighten.

I live in a college community, a college in the Christian and Calvinist tradition, where the times are changing. Old platitudes are shifting, adjusting to a new landscape, and that shifting is witness-able in shows like the one we saw last night. The young people who created this theatrical performance know the prevailing orthodoxies. In a sense, when two of them stepped forward and admitted to having doubts about faith, they were, locally, at least,

coming out of the closet.

I attended college, a Christian college, in the Sixties, a time I believe was the most irreverent age in the last several decades. For the most part, evangelical America lowered its patriotism considerably after just about everyone else did, and for me—and many of my era—a church that kept clanging the righteous cymbal wasn't hard to run from.

When I was a student, it wouldn't have been hard for me to say what those kids did last night. Today students are “into” relationships—with each other and with God. Spirituality has never been as warm and loving as it is today on Christian college campuses; it has never embraced so many, so tenderly. For these two guys to admit their doubts took guts. When the show was over and the four of them sat on chairs in the front of the audience who remained for a kind of talk down, nobody talked about the show; they all talked about faith—specifically, the broken faith of the doubters.

If you want warm spirituality, read Psalm 23. Comfort oozes from every line: green pastures, still waters, a soul's restoration. Say it slowly sometime.

But no single line from Psalm 23—by my estimation—offers comfort like this one: “for thou art with me.” Grab a Bible, hold it in your hand, fan through the pages, and then summarize what you've seen. Here is it: “thou art with me.”

And that's what I wanted to tell the two doubters and just about everybody else who, last night, was worried about them or themselves. “Thou art with me.” That's what David knew when he screamed at the Lord, as he does elsewhere in the Psalms; that's what he never forgot, no matter how far estranged, or how intimate.

“Thou art with me.” That's the whole story.