



***Randall***

***M.***

***Hasson***

#### **Studio and Gallery**

Cedros Design District

346 A South Cedros  
Avenue

Solana Beach, CA

92075

(858) 792-0902

[rhasson  
@randallmhasson.co  
m](mailto:rhasson@randallmhasson.com)

**Narrative  
Paintings**

**Lettering  
Arts**

## Stand Beside Me

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A first for me, this painting really started out with no plan except to start writing.

I had been listening to a Celtic music group called Eden's Bridge, and came across the song "When Grace Abounds"<sup>1</sup> which contained the chant-like refrain "my God will stand beside me". I wrote this refrain vertically on the left third of a landscape format rectangular canvas. The vertical writing symbolizes a pillar, the pillar of God's strength.

I then began to write our questions to God... "where are you?", "who are you?", "do you love me?", "am I worthy?". These questions are a swirling jumbled mass coming from far away and then coming out of the canvas at the viewer. This writing not only symbolizes the ideas and thoughts and questions that swirl around in our minds and hearts, but also the depth of our pain and our need to be loved.

I am not one for the traditional vision... it doesn't happen to me very often. But on this painting, I could "see" a woman's face in my mind that belonged on the canvas. She would be leaning against the pillar of "My God Will Stand Beside Me". The look on the face was sweet but not necessarily calm. The hair was an auburn color, and looked as if she was turning quickly. When something like this happens, I will simply wait for the model to appear, and in my first visit to a San Marcos, CA church called The Movement, I saw my model. Kristen Smeltzer, along with her husband Richard, were an important core couple in founding this young church. I later found out that she had recently had her hair cut in this style... had I seen her a week before I would not have recognized her as the model for this painting<sup>2</sup>.

At this stage of the painting, I had a loose concept that the painting would be about our questions, and then God's answers. I have a valuable little book called "I AM - the 365 Names of God" by John Paul Jackson<sup>3</sup>. I picked it up one day and it occurred to me that God's names are His characteristics, and would therefore serve as the best answers to our questions.

I also began to do some research into the symbolism of the number 9, because "my God will stand beside me" occurs 9 times in the Eden's Bridge song. Biblically, nine is the number of the Fruits of the Spirit and also the Gifts of the Spirit<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, "my God will stand beside me" is written nine times on the painting: the pillar form to symbolize the stability of Spirit of God who is always with us despite the times when we can't feel or hear Him, and the repetition of the refrain to symbolize His gifts operating and His fruit in our lives.

In the process of this painting, I have been reading a book called "Prayer" by Richard Foster<sup>5</sup>. In this book, there is a chapter titled "The prayer of the forsaken" which talks of the times when we cannot hear God or he chooses not to speak to us. St. John of the Cross calls it "The Dark Night of the Soul". All of this information brought to mind the different stages of our spiritual journey, which brought to mind the symbolism of the Labyrinth.

The Labyrinth.

In San Diego, CA, where I live, there is a small community with a beach area called Stone Steps. It is an access point from a bluff that is about 40 high. The first time I visited this place was an afternoon when an artist had gone down to the sand and inscribed a huge labyrinth. From my vantage point, I was intrigued by its beauty, and decided to go down to the beach and walk it. What I found was that I was immediately taken towards the middle, and then gradually in each of the four quadrants, I got farther away and then closer again to the center, until after the last pass I finally entered into the center.

I had never really studied this before, and always assumed that a Labyrinth and a Maze were the same thing. Not so, for in a maze, there are dead ends and blind traps. The characteristic of a Labyrinth, however, is that if you stay on the path you will always reach the center.

I had visited the Chartres Cathedral in France, and remembered it's labyrinth inscribed in its stone floor. There were patterns of wear that showed evidence of pilgrims from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onward walking this labyrinth, many on their knees. One of the famous rose windows there was designed so that at the perfect time of day, when the sun was at the perfect angle, the brilliant light streams through and illuminates the center. I chose the Chartres Labyrinth for this painting.

This then, for me, became an allegory of our spiritual life. There are times, when we first practice to believe, that we are very close to our God, in the "honeymoon stage" if you will. As we continue in our walk, and the cares of this life begin to wear on our faith and commitment, sometimes He seems very far away. Our thoughts and fears and questions continually swirl in our being. But if we stay on our path of faith, if we seek Him first, we will find the "center", or our heavenly reward.

Allegorically, the figure in the painting is questioning God; whether He is there, or loves her, or cares... in fact at the moment in time of the painting, she is looking at the darkness all around her. She is apprehensive of what is happening, and fearful of the unknown.

She cannot "see" God.

And yet, He is still there, all around her. The fact that she is not looking at Him or can't "see" Him doesn't negate His presence. To her questions, He provides His answers... His names or characteristics. And though she is looking away from Him, still, it is His Light that drives away the darkness that surrounds her.

The final piece to this whole allegorical puzzle was another song from a Nashville recording artist named Kim Hill. Kim is a Grammy nominee and multiple Dove award winner (Christian Music's equivalent to the Grammy). I met Kim shortly after my wife and I opened the Gallery, and Kim became my first collector who purchased a print here. She has about 10 CD's released over the years, and I am pleased to have the whole collection.

One of her CD's is called "Hope No Matter What", and contains a song called "Can You See Me". This album was written and recorded in the summer of 2001 (and released after the tragedy of 9/11) and while Kim was going through her own life turmoil. The song that she wrote along with Jamie Kenny spoke directly to what I was trying to say. She kindly gave me permission to use her words on the painting, and therefore complete the thought:

*All alone underneath the stars  
I wonder if the shadows will ever go away  
Where are You?  
Are You very far?  
I feel you drawing closer  
Holding me as I pray*

*I've heard that you are all around me  
Bigger than the sun  
And they say that you know everything  
I do before it's done*

*So can you see me in the dark?  
Feelings I hide  
Secrets I keep  
Every dream I treasure  
Can You see inside my heart?  
Tears I can't cry  
Places I fear  
I hope that you can find me here...<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> "When Grace Abounds" – Celtic Worship II by Eden's Bridge ©1999 StraightWay Music

<sup>2</sup> Kristen Smeltzer: "What was going on with me and the Lord at the time you asked me to be in the painting was this: I had been asking God a lot of questions, mainly about what I could do for Him and if He would use me for ministry of some sort, what was my purpose in the body of Christ, etc. In response, He had given me my very first song the week before you asked me to pose. It was His answer to my questions, He asked me just to sit beside Him and be WITH Him. He wasn't as interested about what I could DO FOR Him, but wanted intimacy and for me to sit at His feet and walk beside Him hand in hand"

<sup>3</sup> "I Am – 365 Names of God" ©2002 by John Paul Jackson. Streams Publications - [www.streamsministries.com](http://www.streamsministries.com)

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 5:22,23; 1 Cor 12: 1-11

<sup>5</sup> "Prayer – Finding the Heart's True Home" ©1992 by Richard J. Foster. Harper San Francisco, a division of Harper/Collins Publishers

<sup>6</sup> "Can You See Me" ©2002 by Jamie Kenny and Kim Hill from the album "Hope No Matter What" [www.kimhillmusic.com](http://www.kimhillmusic.com)