

Psalm 23 (King James Version)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

5/15/11 – Good Shepherd Sunday – Sermon by Susi Kawolics

A few months ago, I went to a wonderful workshop on 4 Doorways to Deepening Worship. The leader, Adam Kukuk, began his presentation with this example. He said: One can say: *I was speechless at your recent generosity toward me, it felt like a choir singing at the end of a movie. Ahh-ahh. I was really confused which way to go, but you helped me and gave me directions, even though I wasn't looking too pretty at the time. I just couldn't find my way, but you got me back on track and got me through, thanks so much.*” Adam went on to say that as powerful as that testimony is, here is another way to say the same thing:

Amazing Grace- How Sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost and now am found – was blind but now I see.

This was his excellent, concrete way of making the point that poetry and song, and keeping things short and sweet are often the best ways to express the deepest emotions and spiritual experiences of our lives. And so it is with the 23rd Psalm, isn't it? It feels wrong somehow to expound on it, to dissect it and analyze it. What can you add to the heartfelt sentiments put forth so beautifully and eloquently in this psalm of trust, confidence, and thanksgiving?

This is one of the most memorized passages in scripture, the best known and most popular of the Psalms. Even people who don't attend worship services know it. It is often heard at funerals, its words have been set to music, and there have been countless works of art inspired by it. It is thought to have been written by King David towards the end of his life. He was a shepherd himself, and then became the greatest King of Israel. And because Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd, as we heard in the gospel passage this morning, Christians associate the images of this psalm with Jesus.

The fact that this psalm is still well-loved today, in modern times, is pretty amazing, considering that most of us probably don't even know any shepherds. And have you ever heard anyone in answer to the question “What do you want to be when you grow up?” say “A Shepherd.”? Nevertheless, this 23rd Psalm still today has the power to touch something deep inside, inspire and comfort us.

What is it about this Psalm, though, that keeps it so popular, and makes it so powerful? Only six verses long, it somehow manages to speak to many of our most basic needs – physical, emotional, and spiritual. It talks of rest and nourishment, of guidance and direction, courage, comfort and healing. It reminds us that God has been faithful to us thus far, assures us that God abides with us even now, and promises God's presence in the future, to the end of our earthly lives and into eternity. As someone in our Bible Study said, “It's the complete package.”

It is a Psalm of trust, of hope, of gratitude, comfort and blessing. And even though it paints an idyllic scene, it still remains truthful. It does not say that we that we will be loved by

everyone, that we will be protected from all evil. No, it acknowledges that we will have enemies, that life will have its valley, its times of sadness, despair and even death. But the words promise that God does not leave us during these times, that God does not abandon us as we walk through the darkness.

Often what happens with a prayer, poem or passage that becomes so familiar is that we recite it or listen to it without really thinking about it. We no longer hear how it speaks to us in the here and now. So today, rather than taking the Psalm apart and analyzing each verse, I want to offer you new ways to look it, and to maybe glean a new insight. I hope that this will enable you to make it personal, to take it to heart.

One way to do that is to hear a different translation than what we're used to. I read the Psalm in the classic King James Version, which most of us are familiar with. A contemporary paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson offers this version:

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.

When I first read this version, one phrase especially stood out for me and took on a whole new meaning: "your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life". This is Peterson's interpretation of "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." The meaning is nuanced in a way I never thought of it before. I find the image of the God's beauty and love chasing me particularly captivating. There is such a difference between the words follow and chase. What follows us is merely going behind us. But what chases us is trying to connect, to catch up. This evokes an image of God pursuing us, even when and if we try to run away. This interpretation speaks of a God who won't let us get away, who actively comes after us, who loves us too much to let us go. How does it feel to think about: Surely goodness and mercy shall chase us – all the days of our lives?

This version from the *Message* is a direct paraphrase of the Psalm. But there are other versions available as well, some of which use more contemporary images than the shepherd image. One version that I found by an unknown source might speak powerfully to those who are in the workplace, and who may need a bit of perspective in their job situations. *The Lord is my real boss, and I shall not want. He gives me peace, when chaos is all around me. He gently reminds me to pray before I speak and to do all things without murmuring and complaining. He reminds me that He is my Source and not my job.*

He restores my sanity every day and guides my decisions that I might honor Him in everything I do. Even though I face absurd amounts of emails, system crashes, unrealistic deadlines, budget cutbacks, gossiping co-workers, discriminating supervisors, and an aging body that doesn't cooperate every morning, I will not stop-- for He is with me! His presence, His peace, and His power will see me through.

He raises me up, even when they fail to promote me. He claims me as His own, even when the company threatens to let me go. His faithfulness and love are better than any bonus check. His retirement plan beats every 401K there is!

When it's all said and done, I'll be working for Him a whole lot longer; and for that, I bless His name.

This may not be as eloquent as the biblical version, but it is an interpretation that can really help someone get through the workday.

Another version, created by a Miss Margaret Rodgers, is written especially for those who love music, and imagines Jesus as a choirmaster:

The Lord is my choirmaster, I shall never be out of step with the music. He leads me in songs of praise and thanksgiving as I remember all His love and goodness to me. He causes me to hum softly as I go about my daily tasks. He sings me a quiet lullaby to bring me rest at the close of the day. He teaches me a restful, quiet, air to sing which brings peace to my troubled spirit.

Sometimes, as I feel God's power and majesty my soul is lifted up in a symphony of swelling music; I sing out in joy and praise, letting myself go and losing myself in the glorious sound of the orchestra, full of confidence, pride, happiness and enjoyment.

But there are times when the music is silent, or strident, or unfamiliar.

At those times I look to my choirmaster to guide me and keep me on the right note. Then once again there will be harmony.

I shall sing happily and my song will bring me joy and inner peace,

until the day when I shall join in that heavenly chorus above with those I have loved and lost awhile. Amen.

There are many such versions of this Psalm, using different images and settings, and today they are easily accessible on the internet. But probably the way to really relate to the Psalm, to really have it speak to us is to actually go through it, and rewrite it for ourselves. Whether or not you're a poet, or a writer, this is a wonderful way to really make the Psalm come alive for you - to go through it line by line, reflecting on what each verse really means to you.

Our Sunday School teachers did this one morning not too long ago in their class. Here is the way our Bainbridge Community UCC children made sense of the Psalm for their lives:
Sunday School – BCUCC 2011

The Lord is my caregiver. I have everything I need. God lets me lie down in a soft, silky bed. God leads me to home.

I will not be afraid, for you are with me. Your people and world peace, they comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me in the sight of people who hurt others. My cup overflows.

I know that goodness and love will be with me all my life and your house will be my home as long as I live.

A few years ago, I had occasion to rewrite this Psalm for myself. Although I had memorized this Psalm when I was very young, it had never particularly touched my heart. I had always thought it was a nice Psalm, very sweet, idealistic, evoking pretty pictures of the countryside with its sheep, pastures and still waters. But I somehow never really connected with it.

But three years ago, I found myself in a time of some crisis. My sister, who lives in Switzerland, was very ill and in the hospital. It became apparent that someone from the family needed to be with her, and so I decided to go. I was making plans to fly there alone, realizing I would have to visit and then take care of my sister, in an unfamiliar town, through an unfamiliar healthcare system, communicating in an unfamiliar language. Naturally, I was frightened, anxious, and feeling alone and overwhelmed. And then, suddenly, the 23rd Psalm came to my mind, and, for the first time, it actually came alive for me. I went from knowing it by heart to

taking it to heart. In reflecting on it, I ended up writing it as a prayer. So I end with this as an example of how to make the Psalm your own, and also as my prayer for you:

Let us pray:

Beloved One,

You are our shepherd-

You provide us with all we need.

When our minds are anxious, and our hearts are troubled,

Lead us to green pastures for rest,

Renew and calm our spirits beside still waters,

Restore our souls.

Guide us in the paths of goodness so we may follow your way.

When our life journeys take us through the valleys of confusion, anxiety, darkness, or death, reassure us, help us not to be afraid.

Encircle each of us, so we can feel and know your constant presence, your strength and comfort.

When our enemies, our fear, our sadness, our anger, threaten to overtake us, lead us to your table. Let us feast on your peace, your compassion and forgiveness. Anoint us and bless us so we may live and act in your goodness and mercy.

You lead us, oh shepherd, you go ahead of us. We will never journey to a place where you are not already there.

You travel beside us, accompanying us every moment of our lives.

And you follow us, supporting every step we take.

Before us, beside us, behind us O beloved, you surround us.

May we dwell in your heart now and forever. Amen.