

The 23rd Psalm: *I Shall Not Want*
Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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The beeper went off around 2 a.m. I was curled on a thin cot in a stuffy conference room at Massachusetts General Hospital, taking one of many turns as the 24-hour, on-call Chaplain during a summer of Pastoral Care training in 1998.

The piercing beep made me bolt upright – it always had this effect. Someone, somewhere in the hospital needed a Chaplain. I didn't know *why* they needed one – they could be dying or a family member could be dead, they might be scared or simply in need of a listening ear or a prayer. As I got myself together, I wondered (not for the first time) if I'd be enough to fill the need.

I found my way to one of the General Medicine floors and quietly entered the still, darkened room of a woman in her 60's with debilitating arthritis. I introduced myself, to which she kindly but firmly replied: "I really want to speak to a Priest, Dear."

This was Boston, after all, but I explained (not for the first time, either) that the priests were only called in the middle of the night when a patient required sacraments. She didn't appear to be at death's door, so I offered to stay and talk with her, if she wanted me to. She seemed disappointed and remarked that she didn't know if I would understand her because I wasn't Catholic. She wanted special prayers, novenas and such. I didn't know even one novena. Well, got me there!

Even so, we sat together in the stillness as she slowly began telling me the heart-rending story of her life. How her husband had carried her from room to room for much of their marriage, due to the early and severe onset of her disease. I learned how much pain she had endured, the children and active life she could not have, and how her strong faith had sustained her. After an hour or so, I apologized again for not knowing any novenas, but offered up instead the 23rd Psalm. "We could recite it together," I suggested. "Yes, dear," she replied. "It's my favorite."

I took hold of her gnarled hand and we prayed six of the most famous and beloved lines of poetry ever written – King James version, if you please. The lyrical and passionate words transcended our religious differences, our ages, and our circumstances. Together, we traveled through the Psalmist's terrain of verdant pastures and foreboding shadow lands.

We sat together at the feast, felt the refreshment of the cup and the comfort of the oil. As Rabbi Lawrence Kushner remarked in his reflection, *Reciting Psalms*, “the text of the Psalm contains the event itself and if read properly, the event could be summoned and relived.” There, united in the dark valley of her room, the woman and I *became* the Psalm.

I said, “Amen and Goodnight,” ducked into the elevator, and burst into tears. Even if I had not been quite enough, the 23rd Psalm seemed to be. I had never felt more grateful for Scripture in my life! In fact, I probably hadn’t felt grateful for the Bible much at all before that moment.

Back in the conference room, I couldn’t sleep, so I wrote this bedside dialogue prayer between Chaplain and Patient:

Chaplain (C): The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.

Patient (P): There is so much that I want. I want to be well.

C: He makes me lie down in green pastures.

P: I am tired of laying here. I wish I could get out of bed.

C: He leads me beside still waters.

P: I feel like I'm in a whirlpool.

C: He restores my soul.

P: Restore my health, too, Lord.

C: He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

P: I feel lost.

C: Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me.

P: Please don't leave me. I'm afraid and it is lonely and dark at night.

C: Your rod and staff support me.

P: It's seems like such a long journey, Lord.

C: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

P: I hope my appetite comes back.

C: You anoint my head with oil.

P: Please wipe my brow with a cool cloth.

C: My cup overflows.

P: My mouth is so dry, may I have a drink of water?

C: Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.

P: How many days will that be?

C: And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

P: Help me to go home, Lord.

C: Amen.

P: Amen.

The words of the patient in this prayer echo the words of longing I had heard so many times at so many bedsides; words I have heard since in my study, in your homes, and in my own heart, especially during this unexpected long and grueling pandemic and the isolation, fear and uncertainty it has wrought: “I am afraid, I am thirsty, I want to be well, I long for joy, I am devastated, I wish to go home to dwell harmoniously in my house.

I wish to leave my house to be gather with family, with friends and at Beacon, I want to make amends, I wish to die peacefully and dwell in the Lord’s house, I do not want to be alone, I want to maintain my faith, even though I’m not quite sure what to have faith in and that faith is often being tested by illness, loss, and confusion.”

The Psalm may state, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want,” but in our heart of hearts, there is so much we want. And perhaps, more than anything, what we want and what we truly *need* is to feel a sustaining presence of some variety in times of despair and crisis. A presence, sacred or human, that we can count on to hold us, lead us, dwell with us in our pain.

This may explain why I like Bobby McFerrin’s musical version of the Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I have all I need.” We’ll hear Roomie sing it right after the sermon. It is one thing to want, and another thing entirely to need. Who among us does not need a companion to walk with them in the shadows? To lead them beside still waters when the world churns like a whirlpool, or to quench their thirst when they’re in the desert? Not even the most ardent atheist is able to, or is meant to, go it completely alone. Haven’t we discovered that since March?

No wonder, then, that the 23rd Psalm is like a portable shrine -- universally treasured and invested by even self-proclaimed rationalists with a power deeper than intellectual argument or reason. We may reject the Bible and the personal God of our childhoods, but we’ll keep this special song of David, as I have since learning it in Sunday School at Congregation Beth Shalom in Squirrel Hill, my Jewish neighborhood in Pittsburgh.

One could say that this Psalm is a kind of talisman we tuck carefully away, but not too far out of reach, to be brought out when our faith flags, our fears overtake us in the deep darkness, and our souls yearn for restoration. So, I say, Blessed be the 23rd and the balm of comfort it can bring to each of us through the words and images of our choosing.

The enterprise of personalizing Psalm 23 is helped along by a veritable plethora of versions crafted over the centuries. For some of us, the patriarchal formations of the classic text, including “The Lord” and “He,” may be not only distasteful, but hurtful as well. Having numerous renditions from which to choose

gives us permission to substitute language and imagery that speaks to us spiritually.

One modern mystical translation that I believe captures the emotion and intimacy of the Psalm refers to the Lord as a sacred “Beloved” and speaks of “being lead in the path of goodness to follow Love’s way.” A “table is set in the presence of all my fears.” In the end, we dwell in the heart of the Beloved forever.” In yet another modern translation, we “sit and laugh in the company of enemies. We give thanks and sing praises.” In one version, goodness and mercy *pursues* us. In others, we have no doubt that these virtues will *attend* us.

In one text, we fear nothing “lurking in a dark ravine,” and in yet another, a table is prepared “in the full view of our tormentors.” McFerrin gives us the sacred feminine, as in: “There is nothing that can shake me, she said she won’t forsake me. I’m in her hands.” One of the more amusing versions comes from a 19th century Scottish preacher who wanted to connect the Psalm to his sheep-herding audience. “The Lord is My Shepherd,” he intoned, “aye, and more than that, he has two fine collie dogs, Goodness and Mercy. With him before and them behind, even poor sinners like you and me can hope to win home at last.”

In addition to the many versions we might select to help us customize this most personal and yet most universal of prayers, we possess as many different reasons for why Psalm 23 speaks so powerfully and poignantly to our hearts.

For one, it captures the loneliness and uncertainty that are inescapable aspects of the human condition. We live in a world where children die of cruel diseases, terrorists blow up buildings with airplanes, and an unhinged anti-Semite shoots up a synagogue on Shabbat. We are living through COVID 19, racial and social unrest and an unhinged attempt to subvert democracy. Psalm 23 offers us a sanctuary where the divine and the human meet; an oasis of solace in a desert of chaos and reversals.

A Rabbinic translation from 1977 suggests that the Psalm teaches us how to make the best of uncomfortable or undesirable situations. “Sometimes a person yearns to move on,” explain the Zen-like Rabbi, “but his attempts are frustrated and he is tied to one place. In this case, he must believe this is the very best place on earth for him. Conversely, sometimes a person yearns to sink down roots in one place, to establish himself securely. But circumstances force him to flee. This too is for the best. Accept it gladly and live in calm repose beside tranquil waters.” If only this were so effortless! Sounds quite idyllic and well, unrealistic, doesn’t it?

I recall officiating at a funeral some years ago, during which we were regaled with one amusing story after another about the deceased, a dynamic man in his 50’s who had died quite suddenly.

We had laughed a lot together that morning, and yet, the moment we began a unison recitation of the 23rd Psalm, heads lowered, tears flowed, and a powerful solemnity filled the Sanctuary. The Psalm tapped into the collective need for comfort in the congregation and offered a place for each person's pain. As such, the Psalm became an intensely intimate experience, an inner lament from one individual (much like you and me) fighting his or her own private battle.

This morning, in the advent of solitary spinning dreidels, and subdued Ho-Ho-Ho's, some of us are descending into a holiday season that is more barren valley than verdant pasture. We mourn the loss of holiday gatherings and traditions, and we're just weary. You know better than anyone what battles rage in your heart and your soul. Maybe you are grieving the loss of a loved one or a relationship; or you've lost your job and with it, your sense of self.

The money may be running out or a family member requires assisted living you cannot afford. You've received a frightening diagnosis, your child isn't thriving, or you just feel like you've walked in the shadows long enough and you're ready for daylight. If so, I walk with you, this community walks with you, and the spirit of Psalm 23 walks with you on this journey.

The typical trajectory of the Psalms themselves represents a journey of sorts, too – from a lament regarding the threat of enemies to praise for God's rescue and protection. Psalm 23 is really quite unusual, in that it begins with the assurance of the shepherd and the safety of still water and then moves into the valley of enemies and out towards a hopeful future of goodness and mercy. Much like the trajectory of our human lives, I'd say - safe harbor to shadow land and back again with as much grace, faith, courage, and humor as we can muster.

It is widely accepted that the Psalms are properly understood as a collection of songs, created by David, a sweet musical shepherd lad who became King of Israel. They're written from the perspective of a people who worship a God whom they believe cares about them personally, much the way a Father cares for his child, or in this case, a Shepherd cares for his sheep.

Note the Psalmist's confidence in that relationship. He writes: The Lord is *my* shepherd. One can imagine the Maccabees, those famed freedom fighters in the Hanukkah story, reciting this Psalm of confidence in their God as they stormed down from the hills to reclaim and rededicate their temple.

Envisioning God as shepherd and personal guardian? Sounds reasonable and even flattering, doesn't it? After all, Moses was a shepherd, Jesus has been referred to as the "door of the sheep," and even Mohammad has argued, "No one can be a prophet who has not first been a shepherd." Yet, scholars have noted David's chutzpah (nerve) in assigning God the role of shepherd, since shepherding was one of the lowliest profession in the ancient Near East. These scholars

surmise that the choice reflects the steadfast loyalty of the shepherd and his conscientious tending of his flock. A good shepherd will fulfill the basic needs of his sheep, no matter what, much like God provided for his people in the wilderness. With the shepherd on duty, they shall not want. This must explain the *New Yorker* cartoon I clipped out some time ago in which one sheep side-eyes his keeper and says to another, “Don’t tell old straw hat over there, but the Lord is *my* shepherd.”

Even so, this timeless poem gives us a powerful and emotional dance between faith and doubt – much like one lived out by us modern creatures thousands of years later. I’m guessing that most of us want and need a shepherd, whether or not we believe in the Psalmist’s personal God or in any transcendent Deity, for that matter. And why shouldn’t we? The thought of being totally alone is just too much to bear. And the *reality* of being totally alone is too much to endure.

And, yet, in that shadowy valley, in all of our darkest moments, the 23rd Psalm is not a test of our faith. It is an admission of our imperfect humanity. We’re not expected to be perpetually fearless, or fragrant with oils, or at ease in green pastures. Yes, we long for this and we wish to be lead there, as often as possible. Goodness and mercy may follow us, righteousness may meet us at the crossroads, but the road will be bumpy and the cup can be empty when we most need refreshment.

The poem speaks to us not of what we “should be,” but rather of a faith always becoming and restored moment by moment on the journey. It speaks not of fearlessness, but rather of courage and hope summoned in the face of fears. It doesn’t demand sainthood, but instead a pledge to live in harmony with oneself, with one’s foes, and with one’s Ground of Being or source of truth and meaning.

Again, as Rabbi Lawrence Kushner reminds us, “if read properly the Psalms become *real*.” And that phenomenon may capture the essence of true faith in a nutshell – experiencing not some paradisaical fantasy, but rather the full *reality* of the human condition -- alone and shepherded, thirsty and refreshed, broken and restored, moment by moment by moment.

The writer Kathleen Norris speaks to this practical but mysterious power in her book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. She writes: “My husband once went into a depression so severe that he had to be hospitalized for several weeks.

I was stunned to learn that we had no medical insurance. In his descent into despair, he had cancelled it – but I also comprehend that this was the least of our problems.”

“Finding out who my husband was,” she continues, “who I was, and rebuilding our life together; those were the critical things. One day at the height of the crisis I was talking to a friend in New York City, who asked, “What are you

doing for yourself? Are you seeing a counselor? Did you get someone to give you a prescription for tranquilizers?”

“No,” I replied,” then I startled myself by saying, “I’m OK: I’ve been praying the Psalms.” “And that’s enough?” she asked, incredulous.

“The funny thing is, it *was* enough.”

Only you know what is enough for you, enough to get you through a human life that is not all still waters and bountiful tables. There have been and will be foreboding valleys, burnt fields, raging rivers, dry foreheads and empty cups. Only you know how to recognize your shepherd in the shadows. Please don’t allow pride or embarrassment to keep you from the comfort that awaits you there. Allow your inner lament to be heard:

“Beloved shepherd, watch over me. Take my hand and don’t let go. Walk with me in a dark and dreary land. I’m thirsty. My forehead is parched. Help me to face my fears and discover my strength. There is so much that I want. Help me to remember and keep faith that I may already have some of what I need.”

Shalom, Blessed be, Blessed we, and Amen.

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