

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Mark 6:30-34,53-56

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 23

Ephesians 2:11-22

July 18, 2021

The Eight Sunday after Pentecost

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The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Acclaimed theologian, Walter Brueggemann, once stated that commenting on this psalm is “almost pretentious.” I have to disagree. Maybe that makes me pretentious and I’m OK with that...at least for today. Because I find such beauty and wonder in going back to those texts we know so well and seeing what new lessons they have to teach.

For some of you, the version we used this morning in our reading was new. It’s from the NRSV translation of the Bible...the New Revised Standard which we use every week. The words are written in more familiar ways that resonate with our modern world. But, my guess is that you stumbled on these modern words and threw in a few shalls, thys and thous.

How many of you were raised with the King James version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm? It’s the one most of us memorized in childhood. If you close your eyes, I bet you can easily recite it from memory.

*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 forever.*

Now, let me ask you this...when have you heard this Psalm recited? In what settings? You might say things like...at funerals, at particular times in the church year like Lent, in devotionals about comfort or adversity or grief. Our connotation for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm tends to be twofold. The first understanding that probably comes to your mind is one of comfort in difficult times.

And, the second may be a little less obvious but possibly even more important. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is also very much about praise and thanksgiving. Praise and thanksgiving for the God who comforts us. Praise and thanksgiving for the God who is with us. Praise and thanksgiving for the God who provides for us. The shepherd, the rod and the staff, the prepared table, the oil on our heads. In reciting the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm we stand in awe at the God who takes care of us, who protects us, and nurtures us even in the most difficult of times. And, we say these words with a spirit of praise and gratitude.

Now...does the concept of praising and thanking God in the midst of hardship make you scratch your head a little? As in...God, I am really suffering right now but you are pretty darn great. I just wanted to say thanks for being you.

The other day I was listening to Ira Glass on his radio show, *This American Life*, and he wrestled with this very question of why we praise God in the midst of hardship.<sup>1</sup> Glass was raised Jewish. And in the Jewish tradition on the anniversary of a loved one's death, family and friends gather together and recite the Kaddish. And one day he found himself at the anniversary of his grandmother's death reciting these words...

*Glorified and sanctified be God's great name throughout the world which He has created according to His will.*

*May His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity.*

*Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that are ever spoken in the world; and say, Amen.*

The Kaddish is said over and over in repetition. In other words, you say that God is great, over and over again as you remember the person who has died, as you remember your own grief. Ira Glass found these words that he knew by heart extremely comforting, if not a little confusing.

God is so great but I still lost my grandmother.

He started to wonder...why is this kind of praise and thanksgiving necessary in times like this? What does it matter to God if we praise him or not in moments of grief or despair or pain?

It's a fair question. And it made me wonder the same thing about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. What is it about this Psalm that brings us back over and over again when times are hard?

Because, songs of praise, prayers of thanksgiving don't take away what hurts. They aren't magic and they certainly don't do the hard work for us. And yet, how many people, maybe yourself included, have lost faith in God altogether when you went through hard times? When the grief or the pain was almost unbearable and you wondered...what kind of God would let this happen? Is this what a Good Shepherd is supposed to be?

And yet, we say those words in our darkest times anyway. We praise and thank God even we are so overcome with darkness, acknowledging our pain while honoring God's greatness.

Ira Glass, in talking with retired Methodist pastor, John Jackson, suggests this...we come back to familiar words such as those in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm or the Kaddish because it is within those words that we are reminded that no matter what we may face, God is love and because God is love, that love is worthy of our praise. And when we praise God, we are recommitting ourselves over and over again, day after day, to live into that love, even when we hurt. We re-pledge ourselves

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/741/transcript>

to that goodness and mercy and grace. These prayers and these Psalms are not for God to hear how great He. They are for us...to remind us of how great God is.

Here's one final piece of biblical trivia for you...did you ever realize that the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is made up of 55 Hebrew words? That makes a precise mid-point at the 28<sup>th</sup> word in the original text. That word at the center of it all is "You" in reference to God. The Psalmist puts God right in the center of our lives so that everything else may revolve around that one truth.

And our response is simply to come back, time and time again, to praise God and dwell in the house of the Lord our whole life. To continually return to God's great presence.

I want to close with one more interpretation of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that brings the words into even closer focus to our lives today. Listen to these words...

**Psalm 23 Meditation**  
**Steve Garnaas-Holmes**

Shepherd me, God;  
     help me follow.  
 All I need is given;  
     help me trust, receive and be grateful.  
 You lead me to rest and restoration;  
     give me faith to drink deeply, to lie down.  
 You lead me on a path with heart;  
     help me follow, for your sake.  
 Even through the darkest valley  
     give me courage to trust and follow.  
 You are with me, your presence comforting  
     in all my difficulties. Help me trust.  
 You prepare a feast for me despite my fears.  
     You invite me to be at peace with my enemies.  
 You shower me with blessing;  
     bathe me in gratitude.  
 Your goodness and mercy stick to me;  
     help me trust I am in you always. Always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.