

A Meditation with the 23rd Psalm

The 23d Psalme

by George Herbert

The God of love my shepherd is,
 And he that doth me feed:
 While he is mine, and I am his,
 What can I want or need?

He leads me to the tender grasse,
 Where I both feed and rest;
 Then to the streams that gently passe:
 In both I have the best.

Or if I stray, he doth convert
 And bring my minde in frame:
 And all this not for my desert,
 But for his holy name.

Yea, in deaths shadie black abode
 Well may I walk, not fear:
 For thou art with me; and thy rod
 To guide, thy staff to bear.

Nay, thou dost make me sit and dine,
 Ev'n in my enemies sight:
 My head with oyl, my cup with wine
 Runnes over day and night.

Surely thy sweet and wondrous love
 Shall measure all my dayes;
 And as it never shall remove,
 So neither shall my praise.ⁱ

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I have a “different” sort of sermon for you this morning.  
 I’ve chosen not to delve into the history of the text;  
 not to dissect the comparisons of God to shepherd or to host at the ever-abundant table;  
 not to deconstruct the many cultural uses of this poem-song.  
 Rather, I’d like to simply *savor* the reading today.  
 To enter into the spiritual act of *appreciating* something wonderful, a gift of God.  
 This is an opportunity to bask in the beauty that we sometimes find in these writings  
 that we call sacred scripture: to “dwell in the bosom of God forever”.

I feel we don’t get to do this very often – not collectively – to just take pleasure in and sit with  
 the words,  
 the images,  
 the poetry  
 ...and the poetry *inspired* by such poetry.

Like this one I just read by George Herbert.

It is not in the exact language of the psalm – it’s not supposed to be –  
 and its language and rhyme may be a little difficult for modern ears because we’re so  
 unaccustomed to hearing poetry read aloud –  
 but Herbert’s poem is beautiful,  
 and it has *itself* inspired hearers’ imaginations since its publication in 1633:  
 in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was set to music  
 and may even be a familiar hymn to many of you.

George Herbert wasn’t the first or last to try to capture his own sense of the psalm;  
 and the sheer number of renderings –  
 whether we find them as moving as some biblical versions or not –  
 reveal how deeply we continue to be touched by it.

Even if you didn’t grow up having memorized this morning’s reading, you’ve heard it before:  
 “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil”.

The passage resounds in popular songs from such diverse artists as U2, The Grateful Dead, India.Arie and Kanye West<sup>ii</sup>. And in countless movies, as characters gather in mourning at a graveside.

These words are such a part of us – similar to the Lord’s Prayer –  
 in that even the versions we choose to use have become somewhat sacred:  
 it may seem almost sacrilegious, for some,  
 that Jan *didn’t* read from the King James Version  
 rather than the NRSV that we use *every* Sunday  
 (New Revised Standard Version).

You may even have noted a small voice in the back of your head reciting the words along with Jan,  
 but translating them back into that familiar, comforting language.

I do it.

You almost can’t help yourself, if you grew up committing the psalm to memory for Confirmation class or  
 for prayer or worship. It’s all but impossible NOT to hear the echo of  
*thous* and *thys*,  
 of verbs ending in *-eth* and *-est* ...

*Yea, thou thinkest such language seemly,  
 though thou mightest have a hard time  
 if I tried to preach a whole sermon thus.*

I joke, but I also recognize the poetic power that archaic language still holds,  
 even if it is not appropriate for every worship service.

The King James language *is* poetic and beautiful –  
 and, even if it’s *not* the best translation to work from if we’re wanting to search seriously for  
 historical or cultural understanding,  
 or if we want to honor the use of inclusive language,

it *can* be a means of entering into prayer.

And in a sermon such as this, where the purpose is to enter the sacred through the sound of the Word and the images evoked, we can appreciate the text better by hearing it in many translations.

So let's pause a moment and read together  
that version of these words ...

***but try not to do it by rote.***

This is a spiritual practice you can try at home with any familiar text:  
reread it slowly and with new ears or an open heart.

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.

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One preacher on this text commented:

“If anyone has ever doubted the power of poetry and metaphor to express the most profound spiritual truths, they surely would be convinced reading Psalm 23”ⁱⁱⁱ.

What words or images stood out for you as we read?
Note them to yourself, and maybe go back to them throughout the week.
Carry them with you as an ongoing meditation, and see how they continue to speak to you.

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Poetry and metaphor can have an impact on deep levels of our spirits.  
Consider how Jesus taught the disciples using metaphor and parable:  
    a sower and seeds,  
    a woman sweeping to find her lost coin,  
    a builder founding his house on rock rather than sand,  
    a temple being torn down and raised again in 3 days<sup>iv</sup>.

Before us today we have  
    a shepherd:  
        who watches over our lives and restores our spirits;  
green pastures:

evoking rest, renewal, and perhaps – for the lamb – a place to play in safe abandon;  
still waters:

being led beside still waters might summon a sense of  
refreshment, cool wetness, a quenching of thirst;  
a table of plenty despite lingering fears;  
an overflowing cup;  
the blessing of oil touching your forehead;  
goodness and love pursuing you wherever you wander;  
and dwelling always in the very heart of God.

Such images of comfort and peace and rest and security stay with us,  
“Yea though [we] walk through the valley of the shadow of death”.

There is no need for interpretation.

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Sometimes – not all the time, but sometimes –
it is faithful to let go of some of the
hows and *whys* and *what fors* behind a Bible text
and let ourselves dwell in the sanctity of the words,
the “pattern, imagery, and symbol we call poetry”^v.

Sometimes this can be a way to find deeper understanding of the message that
a particular verse holds for us in a particular moment,
a different kind of sermon for our spirits,
a listening for the voice of the still-speaking God,
even an act of prayer.

I know the idea of setting aside biblical interpretation once in a while can be a dangerous case to make
in a congregation where we

“bring our brains to church”

and are encouraged to

never stop “living the questions”.

It’s a different path of spiritual adventure for us to let go of the *hows* and *whys* and *what fors* of the text;
yet it can be a way to re-encounter the Bible’s beautiful passages

and dwell in the heart of God
through scripture.

If poetry is, as Robert Frost defined it, “what is lost in translation”,
then if we *always* try to interpret this psalm,
to get under and behind the words,

we risk losing something powerful,
some aspect of meaning
that may come through
simply by sitting with it
as is.

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I've already done more "trying to get behind it all" than "sitting with the psalm" this morning.  
 What I hope for now is that together we can *appreciate* the scripture:  
     enter into the images  
     and listen for something new in the words.  
 And so I'm going to read one more version of this passage.

We've heard the NRSV,  
 and George Herbert,  
 we sang one version from our hymnal,  
 and read the familiar King James;  
     now open your spirit to hear with new ears  
     the prayer-poem-psalm  
     as interpreted by Nan Merrill.

O my Beloved, You are my shepherd,  
 I shall not want;  
 You bring me to green pastures  
     for rest  
     and lead me beside still waters  
     renewing my spirit;  
 You restore my soul.  
 You lead me in the path of  
     goodness  
     to follow Love's way.

Even though I walk through the  
     valley of the shadow  
     and of death,  
 I am not afraid;  
 For You are ever with me;  
     your rod and your staff  
     they guide me,  
     they give me strength  
     and comfort.

You prepare a table before me  
     in the presence of all my fears;  
     you bless me with oil,  
     my cup overflows.  
 Surely goodness and mercy will  
     follow me  
     all the days of my life;  
 and I shall dwell in the heart  
     of the Beloved forever.<sup>vi</sup>

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May your meditations this week bring you to dwell in the beauty of the Word ...
 and in the heart of the Beloved.
 Amen.

ⁱ George Herbert “The 23d Psalme” in *The Temple*.

ⁱⁱ U2’s “Love Rescue Me” from album *Rattle and Hum*; The Grateful Dead’s song “We Bid You Goodnight” sung at the close of many of their concerts; India.Arie’s “Psalms 23” from album *Testimony No. 2: Love & Politics*; Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks” from the album *The College Dropout*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dennis Bratcher on website *The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians*, <http://cresourcei.org/lectionary/YearC/Ceaster4psa.html>.

^{iv} Dominican sister, poet and professor Elizabeth Michael Boyle has stated, “Those occasions when Jesus was *misunderstood* were precisely when his listeners too him *literally*”. *Preaching the Poetry of the Gospels: A Lyric Companion to the Lectionary* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003) xii.

^v Boyle, xi.

^{vi} Nan C. Merrill *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness*.