

Psalm 23

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

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Psalm 23 King James Version

23 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 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.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 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.

How many times have you read this Psalm? How many times have you heard it sung, or called portions of it to mind in a time of need? This is one of those bits of Scripture that seems at home in the language of the King James Version - stately and assuring and full of odd sounding words - yet the meaning is clear. God is good - all the time.

The poetry of this Psalm is - according to the pronouns - intensely personal; 'my shepherd...for Thou art with ME...' so personal that it is easy to imagine the lonely, frightened poet pouring out their heart to God. And since tradition suggests that no less a person than King David is the author, we imagine a renewed affinity for this famous and flawed man of God. (for the record, it is impossible to determine who wrote this beloved Psalm).

My interest this week is precisely the pronouns. Poetry is a most flexible medium - imaginative and open to interpretation. And what strikes me about the first person nature of this Psalm is that it is not restrictive. To demonstrate, I invite you to read this aloud

The Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want. He makes us lie down in green pastures; he leads us beside still waters; he restores the soul. He leads us in right paths for his name's sake. Even though we walk through the darkest valley, we fear no evil; for you are present; your rod and your staff - a constant comfort. You prepare a table before us in the presence of enemies; you anoint our heads with oil; the cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of my life, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The poetry - created in isolation - comes to life in community. Dozens of hundreds of thousands of individuals each resonate with the feelings expressed, and that feeling begins to represent the faith of a community. Generation after generation of lonely longing finds expression in the hope-filled words of the hopeful poet.

Today, as we grapple with what it means to be connected at a distance - as we struggle to understand what life might be like at the end of this pandemic - we consider a very personal poem that expresses a collective need. The Lord is our shepherd, and there really is nothing else we need.

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Let us pray

Gracious God

Being apart from one another isn't the worst thing.

The worst is the not knowing...the changing news and increasing levels of awareness...the corporate fears that play havoc with our personal plans.

Let the poetry of our isolation become something bigger -

In this time of radical difference, remind us of how similar we are.

We share the same anxiety and in you, we are offered the same relief.

Continue to draw us together by your Spirit of grace.

Remind us again that there is no where we go that you are not already present.

Show us green pastures, full tables, still waters.

Bring us peace, we pray through Christ. Amen