

Church of the Crossroads  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
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LIFE AS IT SHOULD BE

Psalm 23

It has been said, and rightly so, that in the Psalms we may discover every possible human emotion. That is why the Psalms are such a rich source for personal prayer and reflection. If you are in crisis, you will find your spiritual condition reflected in the psalms.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me,  
from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,  
and by night, but find no rest.

- Psalm 22:1,2

If you are angry, you will find anger expressed in the Psalms as well:

O city of Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you  
back what you have done to us!

Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!

- Psalm 137:8,9

By the way, there is no recorded incident where the exiles actually acted on their anger. It was enough for them to express their anger in the psalm. They left any vengeance up to God, something that we as a nation should learn to do as well.

Again, if you want to celebrate the gift of creation, you will find a Psalm that meets your need:

O give thanks to the Sovereign of sovereigns,  
for God's steadfast love endures forever;

who alone does great wonders,  
 for God's steadfast love endures forever;  
 who by understanding made the heavens,  
 for God's steadfast love endures forever;  
 who spread out the earth on the waters,  
 for God's steadfast love endures forever.

- Psalm 136:3-6

This is a psalm that speaks of an overwhelming gratitude on the part of the Psalmist for the gift of life and the created order. It speaks of an amazing at-home-ness in the world.

Walter Brueggemann, the teacher of the Hebrew Scriptures, who spoke to us here at Crossroads a number of years ago, did us a great service when he divided the Psalms into three categories. There are, in the first place, Psalms of Orientation. The Psalm I just quoted from belongs to that category. It speaks of an unwavering trust in the God of creation.

In the second place, there are the Psalms of Disorientation. At the beginning, I quoted from two psalms belonging to this category, psalms that speak of life when it is marked by disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved suffering. The experience of forsakenness is at the center of these Psalms of Disorientation. It is Walter Brueggemann's argument, and I tend to agree, that the American church is guilty of ignoring such psalms. American Christianity, caught up in the positive and the spirit of optimism, has been reluctant to admit that there are times when life is experienced as negative and disruptive. The psalms of disorientation may be the very psalms that are needed for our time.

There is, however, a third category of Psalms, and these Brueggemann calls the Psalms of New Orientation. In the background of these psalms is the profound experience of suffering and disruption. Yet, the Psalmist has somehow, surely by the grace of God, come to know newness of life. In these psalms, Brueggemann writes,

...the speaker and the community of faith are often surprised by grace, where there emerges in present life a new possibility that is inexplicable . . . wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God. That newness cannot be explained, predicted, or programmed. We do not know how such a newness happens any more than we know how a dead person is

raised to new life, how a leper is cleansed, or how a blind person can see. We do not know, nor do the speakers of these psalms. Since Israel cannot explain or refuses to speculate, it can do what it does best. It can tell, narrate, recite, testify, in amazement and gratitude, “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

To such a category of Psalms belongs the 23<sup>rd</sup> and it is appropriate that this psalm is always read on the Fourth Sunday of the Easter Season. I am almost reluctant to say anything about this beloved psalm. What words spoken by an inadequate pastor could add anything to its beauty? In this congregation, there are as many stories about its effect on the human spirit as there are people present in this service of worship. Somehow this psalm has had a universal appeal even to those who rarely darken the doors of a church.

It speaks of the re-orientation, that newness of life that so many people have experienced in their lives after they have traveled through the dark night of the soul. The dire prognosis has not proved to be true, at least for the time being. The loss of the loved one in death has not meant, in the end, continued sorrow and emptiness. The impending death, so filled in the beginning with fear and anxiety, comes peacefully in the end. The despair that so often constitutes our human experience gives way to hope. The fear, at one time overwhelming, has dissipated.

We may even broaden the experience beyond the personal to include the social and communal. Citizens, feeling that nothing can be done, find the strength to organize and stop a development in Kaka‘ako. A pristine Waimea Valley, destined to be sacrificed to fulfill someone’s idea of progress, is saved for future generations. A marsh called Kawainui, at one time neglected and left to fall into ruin, is restored, section by section.

Either personally or communally, we say, “This is how life should be.” The dark night is remembered, but it no longer overwhelms. It no longer destroys. The sense of helplessness is there, in the background. But it no longer dominates our lives.

Surely, the beauty and power of Psalm 23 lies in its mysterious ability to speak for us. We rely on it because we could not possibly say it better.

We are struck by the way the psalmist uses names and pronouns. The name of Yahweh is mentioned only twice, once in the beginning, and once at

the end. “Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not want.” “I shall dwell in the house of Yahweh for ever.” The poem, like the trustful life it describes, is lived fully in the presence of God’s name. Yahweh is there, in the beginning and at the end. Yahweh is there throughout the journey of life, satisfying all wants and needs, not just spiritual but material as well. The images of cup and table speak of real food and real drink.

The satisfaction of lacks can be traced to Israel’s memory. In the wilderness there was no food. Hunger was satisfied by manna, the surprising food from heaven. God’s provision is found adequate in the face of every threat to life. “Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

In the beginning, and at the end, Yahweh is spoken of in the third person. At the center of the Psalm, though, Yahweh is addressed as *Thou*.

Even though I walk through the valley of the  
shadow of death, I 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 my enemies;  
Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup  
overflows.

Could it be that when God is addressed more directly the Psalmist is remembering a specific time of deliverance, a time when death was experienced as almost inevitable? In turn, this memory of an actual deliverance from death may give rise to the more general statements about Yahweh’s constant grace and goodness to be found in the beginning and at the end of the Psalm.

We also note the repeated and pervasive use of the first personal pronoun throughout the psalm. “Yahweh is *my* shepherd; *I* shall not want.” The use of the first personal pronoun, however, is not self indulgent. In every instance, it speaks of a human being filled with gratitude, yielding, trust, and thanksgiving. The *I* here knows that in all circumstances, Yahweh responds to every need.

This poem, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm celebrates human life as it should be lived. The question “why have you forsaken me?” of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm and addressed by the God who says “I am with you” becomes here personally affirmed by

the Psalmist who says “you are with me.” The declaration “I am afraid” and addressed by the God who says “do not fear”, to be found in other psalms, becomes here in this psalm the personal declaration, “You are with me.”

And so it is that if life is to be as it should be, the great affirmation of the Judeo-Christian faith, that God is a God who is with us and for us, must, in the end, become owned and internalized personally.

I would like to close by sharing with you a rendition of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that represents a moving instance of how one person has made the words of the psalm his own. His name is a name you may recognize, the name Bobby McFerrin, and the dedication of the psalm is to his mother. On occasion, our choir has sung his arrangement of the Psalm, after the manner of an Anglican chant. The words go like this.

The Lord is my Shepherd, I have all I need,  
 She makes me lie down in green pastures,  
 Beside the still waters, She will lead.

She restores my soul, She rights my wrongs,  
 She leads me in a path of good things,  
 And fills my heart with songs.  
 Even though I walk, through a dark and dreary land,  
 There is nothing that can shake me,  
 She has said she won't forsake me,  
 I'm in her hand.

She sets a table before me, in the presence of my foes  
 She anoints my head with oil,  
 And my cup overflows.

Surely, surely goodness and kindness will follow me,  
 All the days of my life,  
 And I will live in her house,  
 Forever, forever and ever.

Glory be to our Mother, and Daughter  
 And to the Holy of Holies,  
 As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be  
 World, without end. Amen.