

## Louder Than Words

### Psalm 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 forever.

Listening to this psalm as Margaia so beautifully read for us, which words and images caught your ears and lingered with you? (listen to them)

And how did these images make you feel? What sensations did you feel in your body? What did they do to you? Don't describe them to me; just share name that feeling or the sensation in a word or two. (listen to them)

Psalm 23 is a deeply "experiential" psalm. It begins with a confident declaration "The Lord is my shepherd," and you can almost hear "and therefore," I will not be in need. It's a deeply felt conviction. From there, the psalmist doesn't proceed to give a definition of the Lord as his shepherd, nor explain in so many words what kind of shepherd the Lord is, even though there is a strong tradition in the Hebrew Scripture to depict God as the Great Shepherd that provides, protects, leads, guides and cares for God's people Israel.

Instead, the psalmist tells us what his shepherd is doing for him. He is noticing not just what God did but "is doing" even now. He shows us the works of the Lord his shepherd, taking us through the twists and turns of his life; how the Lord keeps showing up, or rather, how the psalmist experiences God's presence through God's action at different times and circumstances. Actions speak louder than words.

The psalmist finally brings us to where he has arrived: hope; a hope grounded in his trust in the Lord who is ever present and active in his life, a hope that looks towards the future with certainty that, come what may, the Lord will keep him near, will have him living in the very house of God, safe and secure forever.

As beautiful as this psalm is, I never felt any particular connection with it until, I read it, after I had walked alongside my husband those last 7-months of his life here on earth. Those months,

when we were walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we were ever aware of God's presence with us, more than any other time in our lives.

Many of more recent English translations of Psalm 23 simply says "even though I walk through the darkest valley." That wouldn't have clicked with me; it was the valley of the shadow of death we were walking, without fearing evil, for we sensed God was with us. He and I could have written our own Psalm 23.

Perhaps, what you "felt" in your body and in your heart when you heard this psalm, is your life responding to the psalmist's experience of God; deep calls to deep. Perhaps mine is just one of many similar experiences of others, and maybe that's what makes this psalm such a popular choice for memorial services and funerals.

And it is a psalm that turns memorials and funerals into the service of witness to the resurrection. Psalm 23 naturally follows Psalm 22, and Psalm 22 begins with the words "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me," the words Jesus cried out from the cross in Matthew and Mark's Gospels. Psalm 22 expressed for Jesus his experience of human despair at the deepest level, abandonment by God.

But the witness of the Scriptures is that the despair of Psalm 22 is followed by God's promise of eternal life of Psalm 23.

The Spirit of God gives movement to the witness of the Scripture from despair to hope, from death to eternal life. The voice of the Spirit is heard, and the breadth of God is felt as people experience this life-affirming movement in their own lives, propelled by God's action, that is always motivated by Love; love for us, love for the world.

Between the scrolls of the Hebrew Scripture in which Psalms were compiled and the very personal stories of our individual lives, God's love infuses the time and space, showing up in determined actions of the courageous people who did not lose hope in the darkest of times. We celebrate Mother's Day today honoring the love and sacrifice mothers have made. It calls us to remember that the seed that grew into this day of celebration was in the love of mothers who cared for the soldiers of both side of the conflict during the Civil War.

Ann Reeves Jarvis and Julia Ward Howe were key figures among many women who organized to advocate for a day dedicated to peace. No matter what label they wore, mother, grandmother, Christian, deist or atheist, their action spoke for the love of God for God's children.

The Scripture also shows us how we resist recognizing this dynamic God who is present and active in our lives, who can only be known by us in relationship, whose only motivation is to love and save us. There is part of us that wants to put a nametag on God, with a clear definition of who God is, and fail to recognize God in God's action our lives that defies the description we give to God that can never be complete. There is part of that wants to put God in a box.

Raising Jesus from the dead to eternal life, and the whole world along with him, was the greatest of God's work, no box or definition can contain. What happens when we try? We see in a scene in John's Gospel when Jesus was still with us in flesh.

John 10: 22-30

The time came for the Festival of Dedication in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was in the temple, walking in the covered porch named for Solomon. 24 The Jewish opposition circled around him and asked, "How long will you test our patience? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered, "I have told you, but you don't believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, 26 but you don't believe because you don't belong to my sheep. 27 My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life. They will never die, and no one will snatch them from my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them from my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

The Festival of Dedication is now celebrated as Hannukah. Less than a few hundred years earlier, in 167 BCE, the Jerusalem Temple fell in the hands of yet another foreign power, the Seleucid dynasty, and its king offered a sacrifice to their gods in the Temple. The Jews revolted and reclaimed the Temple, and the Temple was rededicated to God of Israel in the winter of 164 BCE. It was during this festival that celebrated the dedication of the Temple back to God, Jesus was walking in the Temple and was confronted by some Jewish leaders.

They were Jewish, like Jesus, and had been waiting for the Messiah, the Christ. They had heard Jesus speak about his closeness to God, as well as speaking of himself as a good shepherd. In their minds, according to their tradition, the Shepherd was the image for a leader who would restore rule of God of Israel over and against the gods of other nations. But this Jesus was saying things that didn't quite mesh, like having other sheep that were not of their flock and how he was going after them, too. Is he our Christ or not? If they could get him to admit, then they could accuse Jesus of being an imposter.

If Jesus had used words to explain or accepted their title or a label for who he was, they would have surely misunderstood him. For they only tried to fit him into a category they knew.

But who Jesus was, was more than what they understood by the title of the Christ or the image of the shepherd they knew. In him, God was doing a new thing.

So, Jesus responds “I have told you,” but without explaining who he was. Rather, he points to his “works” and says, “The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me.” Actions speak louder than words. Jesus’ works are both his teachings and actions done in obedience to what God, his Great Shepherd led them to do.

In this, Jesus is the lamb of God, who knows God’s voice and follows it. And God sent him to be the Shepherd for us, so that we might listen to his voice and follow him to life eternal.

Then comes the troubling words of Jesus to those who question him. “But you don’t believe because you don’t belong to my sheep.” Oh, my. Some of us don’t “belong” to God’s flock? How could that be when the writer of this Gospel himself tells us in the beginning God sent Jesus not to condemn the world but to save it? How about John 3: 16?

If God is to be experienced through relationship where God is the one reaching out to us, if we are to experience God in what God is indeed doing in our lives and so come to believe in God, then to say that some “don’t belong” means there is something blocking them from experiencing God’s irresistible love. There’s a lot in the world that gets in the way and stand between God and God’s sheep, like a bad shepherd or false teachings that are not of God.

For example, I have heard it said: “God does not give you what you cannot handle.” What kind of God would you experience if you heard that when you are completely overwhelmed by what the life is throwing at you. That’s like saying God knows your capacity and gives you trials that are just under that capacity, so you don’t break. God does not put you in trials and just watch you struggle. Psalm 23 attests to the truth God does not leave you to handle anything alone but God is right there with you in the darkest valley. If there is any truth in that saying God does not give you what you cannot hand, it’s because God comes to your aid.

Or the saying made popular Benjamin Franklin, “God helps those who help themselves.” Not true, Jesus spent his entire life helping those who could not help themselves. God comes to the rescue those who cannot save themselves, which is the entire world. We are powerless before our own brokenness.

There are things we were taught or we picked up along the way that get in the way of our experiencing God’s irresistible Love. Perhaps you know what some of those things are for you,

or perhaps Whatever they are, that's what Jesus came to destroy, that we may all have life in him. That is the good news of Easter and every day.

Same God, experienced in the uniqueness of our lives. Let us listen for the experience of our common Lord in the first nation version of our beloved Psalm.

### **PSALM 23: THE FIRST NATION VERSION**

*The Great Father above is the Shepherd Chief.*

*I am his and with him I want not. He throws down to me a rope and the rope of his love and He draws me to where the grass is green and the water is good and I go and lie down satisfied.*

*Sometimes my heart is weak and falls down but He lifts me up again and draws me into a good road. His name is Wonderful.*

*Sometimes, it may be soon, but may be long, it may be a long, long time. He will draw me into a place between the mountains. It is dark there but I will not draw back, I will not be afraid, for it is there, between those mountains that the Shepherd Chief will meet me and the hunger I have felt in my heart all through life will be satisfied.*

*Sometimes he makes the love rope into a whip but afterwards He gives me a staff to lean on. He spreads a table before me with all kinds of food. He puts his hand upon my head and all tired is gone. My cup He fills until it runs over.*

*What I tell you is true, I lie not. These roads that are away ahead will stay with me through this life and afterwards I will go to live in the Big Teepee and sit down with the Shepherd Chief forever.*