

Follow the Leader 7-19-2009

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Psalm 23 (King James Version)

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 names 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

Psalm 23 is one of the most known, most beloved scriptures there is. It parallels I Corinthians 13 in the New Testament. Actually, they are, in some ways, book ends in the life of many Christians. Paul's words on the nature of love are often read at weddings while the Psalmist's testimony to God's presence and provision is often read at funerals. Even people who are not part of a faith community often know these scriptures, and maybe John 3:16 if they are sports fans.

When my husband, Tim, and I were in seminary we did an intern year as co-interim pastors of the Christian Church in Panora, IA. One day I went into the grocery store as the new pastor in town. The owner of the store - a very likeable and friendly guy - decided he would test me to see if I knew my stuff. He told me that he would recite a Psalm and I would have to tell him which one it is. As a young, seminary student, I braced myself. There are 150 Psalms and I certainly hadn't memorized them all, let alone by number. But, what the heck. "Okay, I'm ready. (Or as ready as I'll ever be.)" And so he began, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." A sigh of relief came to me instantly as I heard those very familiar words and I said, "Psalm 23." That grocery store owner should not have been impressed, but he was. "Whew! That was too easy."

So here I am, preaching on this well-known, beloved Psalm. In some ways, it's easy. I've heard this scripture probably more than any other. But in another way, it is rather daunting. It's kind of like standing in front of a group at the Grand Canyon and trying to describe

how beautiful the view is. And everyone's thinking, "Well yes, isn't that obvious?" Still, because we think we know it so well, it could be that in our familiarity we have overlooked certain aspects of its beauty and meaning.

Few Psalms touch us as deeply as Psalm 23. A pastor once went to the hospital room of a dying man. The man lay comatose. Tubes were running in and out of his body; his vital signs were weak. The doctors let the pastor in to visit the man but cautioned him, "Don't try to communicate with him. His condition is irreversible. He's gone."

Not really knowing what to do, the pastor held the man's limp hand and began to recite the Twenty-third Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd,..." Nothing. "I shall not want,..." No reaction. But as the pastor continued, he noticed that the man moved slightly, and by the middle of the Psalm the man's lips began to move. At the last triumphant words, "and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever," the man was speaking the words with the pastor. Soon after, he stopped speaking, lapsing deep into the coma, never to recover.

The language and the imagery of Psalm 23 seems to touch a part of us that goes down deep. In this fast-paced, anxiety-ridden world we live in, those words and images calm us down and give us peace. In 1981 Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a very popular book called When Bad Things Happen to Good People. More recently he has written about Psalm 23. Kushner says that the significance of Psalm 23 is that it basically answers a key life question. That question is, "How do you live in a dangerous and unpredictable world?" Rabbi Kushner says, "No matter how grievous a funeral was, no matter how tragic a memorial service was, if I just started to recite the familiar words of the twenty-third Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures..." it tranquilized the congregation. It just made people feel calm."

(<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week813/feature.html>)

After 9/11 people would ask Rabbi Kushner, "Where was God that Tuesday? How could God have let such a thing happen?" Taking on the assurance of Psalm twenty-three, he would respond, "God's promise was

never that life would be fair, God's promise was, when it's your turn to confront the unfairness of life, no matter how hard it is, you'll be able to handle it, because [God] will be on your side. [God] will give you the strength you need to find your way through."

Rabbi Kushner knew this truth first hand. You see he was inspired to write When Bad Things Happen to Good People as he experienced the death of his 14 year old son who was born with an incurable illness. For 14 years he and his wife comforted their son when he was sick and scared, and they stood by him as his health slipped and as he died. They got through that painful, unfair, tragic loss by the goodness and grace of God. Kushner says he always wanted to believe in a loving God, not one who would will that a child or an innocent one should suffer. It was faith in God's love and compassion and presence that kept Kushner and his wife going. When they had used up every bit of strength and love and faith they had in them, somehow God was right there to replenish it. That, says Kushner, is what Psalm 23 is all about.

This last week my husband, Tim, and I, along with both sets of our parents drove down to Springfield, MO to see our son in the Tent Theatre's performance of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. Wow! What a fabulous musical! But one of the songs that stuck in my head from that musical connects with the sentiment of Psalm 23. Joseph was sold by his brothers and ends up in Pharaoh's prison. And, of course, being a musical, he breaks into song, "

Close every door to me,
Keep those I love from me
Children of Israel
Are never alone
For I know I shall find
My own peace of mind
For I have been promised
A land of my own

The truth is, we do live in a world of uncertainty, unfairness, and tragedy. Things happen that are out of our control. Bad things happen to good people. We think of the 9/11s and the Auschwitz's and the earthquakes and genocide as well as the losses we face or the enemies we encounter, the young ones with cancer, the tragic shootings, the car

accidents, and we want to believe that though God is not causing the evil and the injustice, God is providing the strength to endure and the hope to persevere.

We resonate so well with this Psalm precisely because it is so real. It gives no illusion that God will protect us from the darkness or the evil. There is no promise of an easy or unfettered life. No prosperity gospel. No assurance of safety. Rather, it acknowledges that life isn't fair. It recognizes that bad things happen... that there are dark days in our lives... that we so often live in the shadow of death or fear or anxiety, that we have enemies who would surround us. But this Psalm also offers comfort and assurance that it is the very presence of God that gives us what we need including the strength to face hardship or darkness or evil and get through it. We've probably all had times in our lives when we were aware of a strength from beyond ourselves that allowed us to continue when we thought we could not.

I was talking about Psalm 23 to a pastor friend of mine and he told me about a young mother in a congregation he served. This young woman had a little boy who stood up in church one day and recited Psalm 23. The pastor discovered that the mother had taught the boy that passage because the boy's father abused him. It was difficult to deal with. No one would listen. So she thought this passage would remind him of God's presence and help him not be so afraid of his father. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil..." "Children of Israel are never alone..." God is with us.

Okay, so bad things happen and God is on our side. But I can't help but wonder, what about the times we are the enemy or the dark force or the one from whom God's presence and strength is needed. Do you ever think about that? It is easy for all of us to assume we are always on the side of good or we are the ones who need help. But then I thought about those people coming to our community this week, those people from the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, KS who have been going around the Midwest with signs saying things like, "God hates

fags" and "God hates the US" and "God hates you." They'll be in Ames on Friday. And they quote scripture and I'm sure they feel they are the good ones surrounded by dark forces and enemies. I suppose we'd be considered the enemies of the Westboro Baptist Church people. And they would read Psalm 23 and find comfort and assume God is on their side. And what does that mean?

I've been thinking about that quite a lot this week. And it came to me... Psalm 23 gives us a beautiful image of a loving, compassionate, caring God whose presence brings peace and calm in the midst of the storm and the hate and the fear. If we love that shepherd, if we honor that gracious host, then we will live our lives in *that* image. Our lives will be a reflection of *that* God. As we follow the God of Psalm 23, goodness and mercy will follow in our path, not hatred and disrespect. But even when we, like sheep, go astray, God will continue to try to guide us and care for us and bring us back to the place where we can reflect God's true image... the one we find in this beloved Psalm. When we open ourselves to the great shepherd and gracious host, then

surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Psalm 23 (Inclusive Version)

God is my shepherd, I shall not want.

God makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters; God restores my soul.

God leads me in paths of righteousness for the sake of God’s name.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

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

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