

Preaching the Psalms: Psalm 23

Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Everyone knows Psalm 23. It is so familiar that William Holladay calls Psalm 23 “an American secular icon.”¹ The adjective “secular” may be surprising, but it seems accurate. After all, even people who do not attend church generally do attend funerals, and Psalm 23 is an almost universal presence at funeral services in the United States. In fact, I have never attended or conducted a funeral which did not include Psalm 23, thus the psalm’s pervasive presence in our culture, even to the point of being “an American secular icon.” The familiarity of Psalm 23 is one reason that Walter Brueggemann begins his comment on Psalm 23 with this observation: “It is almost pretentious to comment on this psalm.”²

But beyond the familiarity of Psalm 23, what Brueggemann also seems to have in mind is the obvious power of Psalm 23 to speak to us in times of extremity and loss. At a field education seminary several years ago at Eden Seminary, UCC pastor David Spooner, drawing upon his many years of experience as a chaplain at a local medical center, observed simply: “There is *power* in the Twenty-third Psalm.” Indeed! And Gary Charles’s sermon, “Songcatchers,” which appears in this issue, captures faithfully and eloquently the power of Psalm 23 to proclaim “God’s loving presence” in such a way as to “make even the darkest Friday good.” Because Gary has focused effectively on the ability of Psalm 23 to speak “in times of great love and loss” and “in the face of death and tragedy,” something that makes it appropriate for the season of Lent, I am going to develop in this essay another dimension of Psalm 23 – namely, its potential ability to speak to us also in more ordinary times and to shape our daily living. This dimension of Psalm 23 is, I shall suggest, also appropriate for the season of Lent.

To begin to get at this dimension of Psalm 23, it is helpful to realize that Psalm 23 does not possess in other contexts the secular-icon-status that it has in the United States. Jeff Moore, a UCC pastor who has just returned from four years of ministry in Lesotho, recently put it like this: “Psalm 23 does not mean the same thing in Lesotho as it does in the United States.”³ The difference, he explained, has to do in part with the fact that Lesotho is a primarily rural, agrarian nation; and thus people in Lesotho see shepherds at work *every day*. Consequently, they are far more inclined to appropriate Psalm 23 for daily living as well as for times of extremity; and this is a step in the direction which I want to take in this essay.

Another indication of how Psalm 23 may speak differently in other contexts, including Africa again, is offered by Philip Jenkins, as follows:

Or read Psalm 23 as a political tract, a rejection of unjust secular authority. For Africans and Asians, the psalm offers a stark rebuttal to claims by unjust states that they care lovingly for their subjects – while they exalt themselves to the heavens. Christians reply simply, “The Lord is my shepherd – you aren’t!” Adding to the power of the psalm, the evils that it condemns are at once political and spiritual, forces of tyranny and of the devil. Besides its

political role, Psalm 23 is much used in services of healing, exorcism and deliverance.⁴

It simply would not occur to most North Americans to read Psalm 23 as a “political tract” or a condemnation of evil forces in the world. But again, this is a direction which I shall pursue in this essay. I shall suggest that Psalm 23 is “political,” at least in the fundamental sense of the word – that is, Psalm 23 has implications for how we should organize our lives together. Furthermore, Psalm 23 makes its “political” points by condemning forces that, it seems to me, are tyrannical and demonic. By inviting us readers to resist such forces in our lives and in our world, Psalm 23 demonstrates its appropriateness for the penitential season of Lent.

Verses 1-3

The Asian and African appropriation of Psalm 23 as a “political tract” is quite compelling in view of the fact that “shepherd” in the ancient Near East was, in essence, a political title. Kings were known as the shepherds of their people, and it was their responsibility to provide for their people in the way that the Lord as shepherd provides for the sheep in Psalm 23. When the kings of Judah failed to fulfill their responsibility, the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke out “against the shepherds” (Ezek 34:10; Jer 23:1-2), proclaiming that God would take over and actually do what the kings had failed to do – rescue, protect, and feed the sheep/people (see Jer 23:3-6, and especially Ezek 34:11-16). A citizen of Judah hearing these words in the early sixth century B. C. E. might well have been led to say to the Judean king, “The Lord is my shepherd – you aren’t!” Psalm 23 remains, at least in some contemporary contexts, a criticism of governments which fail, for whatever reason, to provide for the lives of all their citizens.

Upon hearing this Asian and African appropriation of Psalm 23, we in the United States may be inclined to think that this dimension of meaning – “a stark rebuttal to claims by unjust states that they care lovingly for their subjects,” in Jenkins’s words – does not apply in our democratic republic. Perhaps this conclusion is correct, although given the growing extremes of wealth and poverty in the United States, it is probably more debatable than we would like to think. In any case, we in the United States are not off the hook so easily, because Psalm 23 is at least an implicit criticism of our tyrannical (and some would say demonic) merit-oriented, consumer-driven, socio-political order.

What God as shepherd does is to create conditions in which the sheep can say, “I shall not want.” The NRSV preserves the RSV and KJV translation at this point, and “want” can mean “lack,” although this is a rather archaic sense of the word. A better translation is “I shall lack nothing.” This condition of lacking nothing should not be understood as luxuriance or excess; rather, the shepherd provides the basic necessities which make life possible for a sheep – food (“green pastures”), water (“still waters,” which sheep need in order to feel comfortable enough to drink), and protection (“right paths,” the difference between remaining safely with the shepherd and flock as opposed to getting dangerously lost). The phrase, “restores my soul” (Hebrew *nephesh*, which means fundamentally “vitality, life”) is probably best translated as “keeps me alive.”

In short, God the shepherd provides what all the sheep together *need* to live, and

such provision is a *gift*. At this point Psalm 23 becomes a criticism of our socio-political order in the United States; or in Jenkins's words again, at this point we begin to see "the evils that it condemns." In our North American society, life (or the "good life," as we sometimes call it) does not generally involve having simply what we *need*; rather it involves accumulating more and more. And in our society, life and the resources which sustain it are almost never viewed as something we have *received*, but rather as something we have *achieved*. The system amounts to a form of tyranny, all the more effective because it is so subtle. Thomas Merton characterizes it well: "Even though there's a certain freedom in our society, it's largely illusory. Again it's the freedom to choose your product, but not the freedom to do without it. You have to be a consumer and your identity is to a large extent determined by your choices, which are very much determined by advertising. Identity is created by ads."⁵ When identity is created by advertising, the result is a socio-political system which fosters greed. Nearly seventy years ago, Reinhold identified greed as "the besetting sin of a bourgeois culture."⁶ More recently, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan suggested that "our national illness is . . . 'infectious greed.'"⁷

If this is the case, then the cure needs to be something like the perspective offered by Psalm 23—that is, an identity formed not by advertising, but rather by the knowledge that life and its resources are the gift of a gracious God. The result would be a socio-political system which fosters not greed, but gratitude. Jesus, using political language, called this system the "kingdom" or realm of God. Living in such a realm, we might even be led to say, "I shall not want," in the contemporary sense of the word "want." In other words, "Because I have everything I *need*, I don't want anything else!" One of the symptoms of our "infectious greed" is the general inability to distinguish between wants and needs, a situation to which advertisers happily continue to contribute. In this context, how radically faithful it might be to say, in the contemporary sense of the word, "I shall not want."

To be sure, such a declaration is almost unimaginable in our cultural context, but it is entirely in keeping with the season of Lent. I used to think that giving up something for Lent was trivial, and of course, it can be; but now I look far more favorably upon this traditional observance of the season, because we need all the practice we can get at living with enough and not wanting more stuff as a matter of identity-formation. If it is not reduced to triviality or self-help, then giving up something for Lent might be a healing movement toward wholeness beyond "infectious greed" and a form of penitence by which we confront and combat "the besetting sin" of greed, one of "the evils that . . . [Psalm 23] condemns." Following Jenkins's lead a bit further, perhaps we should even speak of being led by Psalm 23 toward the possibility of being exorcised, or at least being delivered, from our captivity to greed.

Notice finally, in terms of vv. 1-3, that God provides the necessities which sustain life "for his name's sake." The word "name" can connote "character" — that is, it is God's essential character to will and work for life. In this regard, it is significant that Douglas John Hall summarizes the content of the Christian mission with the word "life" as follows: "The goal of mission is nothing more or less than this: to participate in our Lord's mission to help creation discover and realize the LIFE [sic] that is being offered in the midst of all this death."⁸

At this point, Psalm 23 not only condemns certain evils, but it also commends certain faithful pursuits. It reminds us that Lenten self-denial is not an end in itself,

but is to be in the service of God's mission in the world (see the missional direction in Eph 5:8-14, the Epistle Lesson for the day). In short, the life we have received is the life that we are called to share with the world. True gratitude always issues in generosity.

Verse 4

The shepherd metaphor continues in v. 4, but it is appropriate that NRSV sets off v. 4 from vv. 1-3 because of the grammatical shift. Whereas God had been referred to in the third person in vv. 1-3, God is now addressed directly in v. 4b, which also happens to be exactly the central poetic line, according to the layout in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. As is often the case in the Psalms, the central structural line is also central theologically: "You are with me." This assurance is all the more emphatic since the clause in Hebrew is verbless, necessitating the use of the personal pronoun "You."

Unlike in vv. 1-3, an extreme situation is in view in v. 4, which reinforces Gary Charles's point that Psalm 23 "does not promise that Jews and Christians get the good from life while the rest of the world gets the dregs." As suggested above, Gary's sermon develops faithfully and helpfully the ability of Psalm 23 to speak to us in times of extremity. As the sermon makes clear, the promise is God's powerful presence in the midst of pain, suffering, and adversity, not that these things can be avoided. As Gary puts it, how could it be otherwise for those of us "who follow a crucified Lord?"

If one is looking for points of contact among the lections for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, NRSV's translation, "darkest valley" (instead of "valley of the shadow of death"), could possibly be put in conversation with the themes of light and darkness in Eph 5:8-14 and John 9:1-41.

Verses 5-6

Although there is some room for debate, it seems fairly clear that the metaphor shifts in v. 5 from shepherd to gracious host. In any case, the metaphors are parallel; the gracious host provides for the guest as the shepherd provides for the sheep – food ("a table before me"), drink ("my cup overflows"), and hospitality/protection ("you anoint my head with oil").

Just as v. 3 concluded with an allusion to God's character, so also v. 6 has God's character in view, especially when it mentions "mercy." The Hebrew word is *hesed*, and NRSV usually translates this word as "steadfast love." In any case, "mercy" or "steadfast love" captures in a word God's essential character (see especially Exod 34:6-7); and it is not surprising that the word pair, "good"/"goodness" and "steadfast love," appears frequently in the Psalms as a sort of standard description of who God is and/or what God does (see Pss 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 136:1).

NRSV's "shall follow me" is a very weak translation. The Hebrew verb here clearly means "pursue;" and John Goldingay uses the word "chase," which even better captures God's active, even frantic, attempt to reach us with the gift of life and the resources which sustain life. The verb in question may also shed some light upon, or at least be related to, the mention in v. 5 of "the presence of my enemies." Ordinarily in the Psalms, it is the enemies who "pursue" or "chase" the psalmists (the NRSV sometimes translates the verb as "persecute"). Here, the enemies are present, but it is

God's goodness and steadfast love which are out to get the psalmist! It is a striking reversal.

It is still not entirely clear, however, what the enemies represent or are doing. Do they represent extremity or threat, paralleling "the darkest valley" of v. 4? Are they there for the psalmist to taunt as he or she enjoys the meal which the host has provided? Or perhaps, are the enemies dining at the table with the psalmist? I prefer the latter option, and if the conclusion to Psalm 22 can be taken as a canonical clue, it is at least a possible construal. The conclusion of Psalm 22 imagines a thanksgiving feast (see Ps 22:26), which includes not only the poor, but also finally a world-encompassing list of guests ("all the families of the nations," v. 27), gathered by the universally sovereign God (v. 28). A table that big is bound to include our enemies!

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the interpretation of the enemies, it is clear that the psalmist is safely sheltered "in the house of the Lord" (Ps 23:6), not just temporarily, but for his or her "whole life long." As in vv. 1-3, God's gracious provision for life will be received on a daily basis, and it will be received in a communal (that is, "political") context. As Konrad Schaefer concludes: "The poet voices the community sentiments. The "table for me" is not a meal in solitude, but a convivial banquet, and the "house of the LORD" is a public place where the community enjoys worship and public life."¹⁰

The final verse of Isaac Watts's metrical paraphrase of Psalm 23 also captures well the celebration of God's daily provision for God's household:

The sure provisions of my God attend me all my days;
O may your House be my abode, and all my work be praise.
There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come.
No more a stranger, or a guest, but like a child at home.¹¹

Watts's interpretive expansion – "like a child at home" – also eloquently conveys the spirit of humble gratitude and daily reliance upon God which characterizes those who know that life and the resources which sustain life are the gifts of a gracious God. So, in the final analysis, Psalm 23 is a timely "political tract" for Lent, simultaneously condemning the evil tyranny of greed and excessive individualism which characterize our socio-political context and commending a Lenten discipline consisting of humility and gratitude, the foundations of penitence and authentic self-denial, which enables us to discover our true selves in communion with God and with all God's household.

Notes

1. William L. Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 359; see 359-371.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 154.
3. Jeff Moore, Breakfast Forum address on contextual biblical interpretation, Eden Theological Seminary, October 9, 2007.
4. Philip Jenkins, "Liberating Word: The Power of the Bible in the Global South," *Christian Century* 123/14 (July 11, 2006):26.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press), 110. (My thanks to Veronica Walsh Don, who called this work to my attention.)

6. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, Vol 1. Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941/1964), 191.
7. Phyllis A. Tickle, *Greed: The Seven Deadly Sins* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18. Tickle (p. 59) cites Greenspan's "semiannual report to the Senate Banking Committee on 16 July 2002."
8. Douglas John Hall, *Christian Mission: The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death* (New York: Friendship Press, 1985), 98.
9. John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1-41* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 345, 352.
10. Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 59.
11. Isaac Watts, "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need" in *Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), no. 172.