

Songcatchers

Psalm 23

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A favorite, somewhat obscure, film of mine is *Songcatcher*. It tells the story of an Ivy League musicologist at the turn of the twentieth century who leaves the comfort of her academic life to live in the harsh environs of the Appalachian Mountains. In this remote and rugged area, she meets a surprising community of songcatchers.

Some songcatchers gather by the bank of a creek to play the mandolin. Some plow rocky fields to the steady beat of a heartrending ballad. Some sit in rocking chairs on front porches, singing stories to their young ones about the joys and struggles of life. What soon shocks the sophisticated musicologist is that these songcatchers are not singing new songs. They are singing songs of their distant ancestors from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, songs that have lived in these remote and ancient hills ever since their ancestors first crossed the ocean. Over time, these songcatchers added their own mountain dialect to the lyrics, but the melodies survived, connecting songcatchers over a chasm of centuries and distance.

I am thankful for songcatchers who have enriched, and even saved, my life in so many ways. During Lent, I am especially thankful for songcatchers. This season has a way of touching me at depths deeper than I care to go and connecting me with love and loss that I don't dwell on every day. During this sensitive and vulnerable season, I am thankful for songcatchers who have passed down songs that I still sing in times of great love and loss. And well beyond this season, I am thankful for those special songcatchers who have an ear for music that should never die, music that I hope I will never forget.

Whether we consider ourselves musical or not, it does not take a great ear to pick out music that makes our minds race, our hearts pulse an extra beat, our wills engage, our souls soar. This is the music that enriches and saves, the music that true songcatchers pass on.

Perhaps more than any other night, I was thankful for songcatchers on the night of 9/11 when through collective tears, we sang, *O Beautiful for Spacious Skies* at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House, just a few miles from the cratered Pentagon. I thanked God that night for the songcatchers Katherine Lee Bates and Samuel Augustus Ward who had passed down the stirring music and words of *America the Beautiful*. On that holy night when life seemed anything but beautiful and we were living in gut-wrenching fear of what might fall next out of the spacious skies, I sang those words like never before, in a prayer for what might yet be.

I have found that songcatchers are absolutely invaluable in the face of death and tragedy. Too often in times of death, many of us are struck mute not knowing what to say, while others of us should be struck mute. Soon after 9/11 and almost always in times of death, I hear people say things that they don't necessarily either believe or fully understand. They say something, because to say nothing doesn't seem to be a viable option. People stumble through the words "God must have a plan," as if we would be less than Christian if we confessed, "I don't begin to understand why so many

died so senselessly and left such a huge hole in so many lives.” Whatever the time and for whatever the reason, death challenges us not only to do something – bake a cake or bring some flowers – but to say something, and something with meaning, something about God.

I have stood with many people in times of death, and many friends have done the same for me when my father and then mother and then brother died. I have spoken many words of consolation at the time of death, and many words of consolation have been spoken to me. The words that have held the most meaning for me and for those whom I comforted are not new words at all. They are words of consolation and promise that would have long since been lost had it not been for the faithful persistence of songcatchers years ago, songcatchers who sang the community to sleep to the soothing melody and assuring words of this song.

The song begins: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” The 23rd Psalm was first written and sung in the Hebrew language, but over time, songcatchers have translated it into Greek and then Latin and then into a thousand different languages. To give you a sense of its beauty and musicality in various languages, listen to this Psalm now, with the first line read in Hebrew, the second in Greek, the third in French, the fourth in Swahili, the fifth in Kikuyu, and the last verse in Spanish. [readers, preferably native readers, stand and read the first line of Psalm 23].

As a child, I learned the 23rd Psalm in the poetic cadence of the King James Version of the Bible that we just read in unison. Long before I acted in my first Shakespearean play, I learned to love the way that “thou” and “art” and “anointest” and “runneth” rolled off my tongue and caressed my ear. The power of the psalm is in more than its poetry; the power is in its theology. This Psalm does not explain why any of us have to watch loved ones gasp for their last breath or waste away into mental oblivion or crawl into booby-trapped caves in Afghanistan or end lives too soon because of car bombs in Baghdad, but it does teach us to sing and believe this promise: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”

I suspect that this song has lasted for centuries and has been sung in thousands of languages because death does not respect any generation or ethnicity or language, any sexual orientation or social class. We will be reminded of that harsh reality again in the near future when you and I will walk with Jesus through a horrendous week that the church dares to call: *holy*. Early songcatchers heard the psalmist’s song as one that time dares not erase; one that must be shared whenever life is fragile, suffering real, and questions abound. Psalm 23 does not answer all the complex theological questions that death provokes, but it does offer solid ground on which you and I can stand when the earth seems to be one long seismic tremor.

Early in my life, special songcatchers taught me to sing: “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.” When I was young, I heard this song as a lucky charm, a promise that if I toed the religious line, then God would bless my life with an unceasing array of good things, and more importantly, would shield my life against a barrage of bad things. As my faith grew up, I realized that the song promised no such nonsense.

This psalm does not promise that Jews and Christians get the good from life while the rest of the world gets the dregs. This is not a prosperity psalm in the modern usage of the term “prosperity,” as if God is waiting to fill our material treasure chests if we

are just good enough. This is definitely not a pain-free psalm offering the key to a pain-free religious life. How could it promise that to the often long-suffering people of Israel or to their Christian kin who follow a crucified Lord?

As my faith grew up, I realized that the same One in whose house you and I will always dwell is also the One whose nature is that of goodness and mercy. That's why the song begins: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want" and ends "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." If you and I can never travel to where God is absent, if we can never descend so low as to step outside of God's loving presence, then what more could you and I ever want or need or even desire? Learn this song by heart, because it is one that can even tame the despair of Lent.

I am so thankful for songcatchers who did not let the 23rd Psalm become an ancient relic or a distant memory. I am grateful that they have passed along these words that can make even the darkest Friday good. As I think of what you and I will leave behind to those who follow us in the faith, I pray that one day it will be said of us: "Thank God, for those faithful songcatchers."