

Shepherd and Host

I love fables like this one I read last week: A trapper caught a bird. The bird said to him, “If you let me go free, I will give you three words of wisdom.” Having never met a talking bird before, the trapper said, “If I the three words of wisdom are valuable, I will let you go free.” The bird said, “First, if someone tells you something absurd, don’t believe it, no matter how trustworthy the speaker is. Second, if you do a good deed for someone, never regret doing it. Third, never try to reach for something too high for you.” The trapper agreed that the bird’s three words of wisdom were valuable, and he let the bird go free.

The bird hopped a short distance away and said, “You fool. I have a huge diamond in my stomach. Had you killed me as you had intended, you would be a rich man.” Immediately the trapper flew into a rage and went after the bird to kill it. But the bird flew into a tree. The man climbed into the tree, but the bird just kept going up higher and higher among the branches. Finally the trapper leapt at the bird, but missed and fell, breaking his legs.

Then the bird flew back to the trapper and said, “You fool. I said I had a diamond in my stomach, which is absurd, but you believed me. Then you regretted the good deed you had done in setting me free and you came after me to kill me. I flew into the tree and I was too high for you to reach, but you pursued me anyway, and now here you are! How quickly you forget the wisdom you believe.”

We all forget the wisdom we believe. By the door where I exit my house most mornings are several religious works of art: posters and paintings and needlecraft and such. Each of them has a Bible verse or Christian message written on it in some way, such as “Love is patient and kind,” and “I am the resurrection and the life,” and “Jesus, I trust in you.” I put these there by the door intentionally so that everyday I, and my family members, would see them and be inspired or comforted by them, as the events of the day may suggest. But, in fact, I must confess that I have become so accustomed to them being there that I really don’t consciously see them most mornings. I ignore the wisdom I believe; I often ignore what God is saying to me.

That may also hold true regarding the 23rd Psalm for many of us. We have heard it so many times that we fail to think about what it means anymore; it doesn’t make an impression on us when we hear it. Yet, what the 23rd Psalm has to say is incredibly wise and valuable to us. It’s something we should pay attention to. It’s meaning is not too high for us to grasp. So let’s dust off the 23rd Psalm today and hear it again for the first time.

I was preparing a Bible Study last week for our local Lutheran Pastors’ Cluster on the lessons for this Sunday, what leapt out at me is the way the image of God changes from the first half of the psalm to the second half of the psalm. Have you ever noticed that the 23rd Psalm begins with an image of God as a shepherd feeding and taking care of us, and it ends with an image of God as the host of a great banquet, again caring for and feeding us? I guess I always knew that, but I hadn’t thought about it much lately. Sometimes a fresh translation can help us notice things we have started to overlook in scripture.

The 23rd Psalm, as we read/sang it today, is a new translation. It is, in my opinion, in some ways an improvement over other modern translations, and in other ways not an improvement. The Psalm begins, “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. The LORD makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.” There we have the basic function and duties of a shepherd being applied metaphorically to the Lord.

Sheep consume quite a bit of grass and will eat the vegetation right down to the bare earth if you let them, so the shepherd has to keep them constantly in motion, seeking out new places to find food. Sheep, of course, also need water, and, not being the brightest animals, they will drink unclean water if you don't watch out. So the shepherd has to constantly direct them to clean water. We know that “human beings do not live by bread alone but every word that comes from the mouth of God.” So what does God as our Good Shepherd do for us in that regard?

How does God nourish our spirits as a shepherd nourishes his flock? One way is through our worship, our liturgy. The first half of our worship each Sunday is sometimes called the Liturgy of the Word. Each Sunday the front half of our service includes an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a New Testament reading, a gospel reading, and a sermon, as well as hymns and other liturgical pieces based on Biblical texts. That's a heaping helping of the Bible. God's word is our spiritual food and drink, and through His Word God gives us direction for daily living in this world, as well as assurance of our place in the world to come.

The Psalm continues, “You restore my soul, O LORD, and guide me along right pathways for your name's sake.” I don’t want to be picayunish, but I cannot understand why the translators switched so abruptly here from the Psalmist addressing the Lord in the third person, calling him “He,” to the second person, calling him “you,” unless they are merely trying to avoid using masculine pronouns for God – and there’s nothing wrong with calling God “He.” Changing the person of the sentence makes it not proclamation but prayer, which is different and not true to the Psalmist’s intent. Anyway, what struck me about this verse is that the word translated as “right,” describing pathways, can also be translated as “safe” pathways.

The pathway to God is the Word, the Word as present in the person of Jesus Christ, and the Word as present in the written Word, the Bible. We are right and we are safe when we let the Bible be our guide to God the Father. We hear people say a lot today, “God is still speaking,” and that’s true – but God is not contradicting what he has already said in Holy Scripture. We also hear people say a lot today, “We have to apply today what we have learned in the 2000 years since Christ’s death,” and we do – but Christ who died lives again, and nothing we have learned about him has overturned the simple truths he taught us two millennia ago.

I am so glad that this translation has returned some of the old King James language to the next verse in the Psalm: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” A more literal translation might be “the darkest valley,” and perhaps I’m being inconsistent, but I think the “valley of the shadow of death” gets at what the Psalmist intended more closely.

That's a valley we all know. Many of us have been there. And we who have returned from that valley know it was the Lord's doing, not our own. If we are brave in the face of death, it is only because Christ is by our side. The shepherd used the rod to fend off predators, like wolves, and he used the staff to pull straying sheep back into line. Haven't we had both experiences: the experience of God defending when we were vulnerable, and the experience of God gently, or in some cases not so gently, correcting and disciplining us. Do not fear or detest the Lord's discipline; he only disciplines those he loves so that we can be even more fit for His service and His Kingdom.

This is where the image for God abruptly changes in the 23rd Psalm: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over." The shift to the image of God as banquet host also occurs in the second half of our worship. After the Liturgy of the Word comes the Liturgy of the Meal. The service moves from Bible reading and preaching to the celebration of Holy Communion.

Holy Communion is the banquet God prepares for us. It is the meal He feeds us that assures our forgiveness and makes us one with him and with one another. Christ truly is the host of this sacred meal and the invitation comes from Him. And in a unique twist, Christ who is the host, in that he is the founder of the feast, also becomes "the host," another name for the bread we consume, as the Creator of the universe condescends to be food for us. But in another incredible twist, our bodies then become the host of the Holy Spirit, as God lives in us and works through us. Most amazing!

The 23rd Psalm ends: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” Maybe today you don’t feel like God’s goodness and mercy are following you. That’s okay. We’ve all got our problems. The word translated “follow” there can also mean “pursue.” God will pursue us with His goodness and mercy. God will hunt you down with his love. You cannot escape God’s blessings. Here and in the hereafter God is for you, and he will find you, and you will be blessed. Believe it; live it; love it. Christ will be our light. You can count on it. Amen.

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