

SAVED BY THE SHEPHERD

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Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

***“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me.”***

Psalm 23:4

It’s one of the best-known and best-loved passages of the Bible: the twenty-third psalm. Generations have memorized it, in Sunday School or at the knee of parents or grandparents. It’s one of the first Bible passages many of us learned, and — as common as it is at funerals — it’s among the last words said over us when we die.

Very often, at a graveside service, I read the twenty-third psalm, in the familiar King James Version. If it’s a churchy crowd, I’ll often ask those gathered around the grave to say the words with me. In recent years I’ve noticed that those whose lips are moving are mostly of the older generation. Bible memorization is not what it used to be — although, if truth be told, memorization of *anything* is not what it used to be. When you can have a world of data on your smartphone — including the entire Bible — why bother?

The power of that sort of memorization came home to me many years ago, when I was a seminary intern. I’d been sent to visit one of the oldest members of

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the congregation: a woman named Mary, who was well up in her nineties. Mary was blind, and had been so for years. She was stubbornly independent: she lived alone, in a little apartment she knew so well she could navigate from room to room by memory.

But now Mary was in the hospital. It would prove to be her final illness. We'd had a pleasant visit — she wasn't in any pain — and, as I usually do, I asked if she wanted us to have a prayer together before I left. She said yes, of course. I paused to collect my thoughts, and I must have paused a little too long for Mary. Just as I was about to open my mouth, I heard her speak: "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." And on she went, right on to "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

It occurred to me, in that moment, that Mary hadn't read those words in years. (How could she? She was blind.) But long ago, as a little girl in a time when automobiles were a rare thing, and when electricity in a house was a wild dream, Mary had learned those words, in King James English. They were the words that came back to her on her deathbed, words of trust, words affirming that God would never let her go. As Mary spoke those timeless words, I knew that any prayer I might contribute would be but a dim shadow by comparison. I didn't try. We had prayed together, but the words were neither hers nor mine. They belonged to the

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church through all ages.

It is hard to look at the twenty-third psalm without recalling stories like that, without giving memories leave to well up. I'm sure many of you could tell some story about this psalm, and what it's meant to you or to those you love.

So, please understand, when I say what I'm about to say about the King James Version, that I've got a tremendous appreciation for the poetry of those words. The problem is, if you want to understand what the psalm is really saying, the King James Version is not such a good place to begin.

Biblical scholars have always admitted that the twenty-third psalm presents problems of interpretation. It almost seems to be two psalms connected together, and the fit between them is not very good. You know how it goes: from "The Lord is my shepherd," through the green pastures and still waters, through a dark valley where a shepherd's rod and staff bring comfort. Up until that point, the writer of the psalm seems to be envisioning himself as a sheep. The psalm's traditionally attributed to David, and if that's true, the sheep image is no surprise — remember, the young David was a shepherd.

Yet the images seem oddly inappropriate. What sheep have you known that was concerned with "paths of righteousness," or has contemplated its own end in

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“the valley of the shadow of death”? The words are beautiful, but the logic is certainly confused.

Read on, and you’ll discover a banqueting table, and anointing oil, and an overflowing cup. We’ve stepped over, now, into the second half of the psalm. The scene has changed. The author now seems to be not a sheep, but a human being sitting down at table, enjoying a feast. God is no longer shepherd, but host.

It was my seminary Old Testament professor, Bernhard Anderson, who taught me a different interpretation: an interpretation that restores the psalm to its integrity, as a story with a single meaning and a single narrative.

This interpretation has its roots in the original Hebrew. From the King James Version, you’d never know it, though, because parts of it stray pretty far from the meaning of the Hebrew. Our New Revised Standard version is much more literal.

If you were listening carefully when the Psalm was read — and if you’re one of those people who know it by heart in the King James version — you may have noticed some differences between the newer translation and the older.

You may have noticed that the NRSV does not say, “He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness.” It says instead, “He leads me in right paths.” It makes no mention of “the valley of the shadow of death.” Instead, it speaks of “the darkest valley.”

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It's these differences that make it clear what this psalm is all about: something you'd be hard pressed to figure out if you only had the King James Version. There's a back-story here, the story of a very human crisis of faith: and of a man who steps in to rescue the anxious believer.

You've probably heard Psalm 23 referred to as "The Shepherd Psalm." I think it's more accurate to call it "The Lost Traveler's Psalm."

Imagine that the narrator is not picturing himself as a sheep, but rather as a lost and lonely traveler. The blazing heat of desert noonday is long gone, and the bitter cold of desert night is coming fast. The road has disappeared into the twilight; he's lost his way. Provisions of food and water ran out hours ago, and the traveler's parched and hungry. In the distance, a jackal howls. Fears of wild animals and bands of robbers flow, unbidden, into his mind. He regrets having begun this journey, and wonders if it will be his last.

But then the traveler sees a figure standing on a hillside, outlined against the darkening sky. It is a shepherd: a common, ordinary man, but a man who knows these hillsides and ravines. He goes down to the weary traveler, and leads him up out of the shadowy valley to a place where the last beams of sun still light the way ahead. He leads the weary wayfarer to a grassy meadow, and invites him to lie

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down and rest. The shepherd cups water from the oasis spring in his hands, and offers it. The traveler drinks gratefully.

He glances up to see the shepherd's rod — that small club he uses to protect the sheep — and his staff, or walking-stick. These are the tools of the shepherd's trade. A man who carries a rod and a staff knows his way through the desert.

When the traveler has rested a bit, the two walk on, following “the right paths” this time, to a black goatskin tent set amidst an encampment of other tents. These are bedouins, dwellers in the dry and desolate places: determined people who know how to scratch a living from the desert.

The shepherd brings the man into his own tent. It's lit inside with oil lamps, and decorated with carpets as intricate and beautiful as the goatskin tent is plain. There is no fear of these strangers; the laws of Middle Eastern hospitality are in effect. As long as the traveler is in the shepherd's tent, the shepherd is pledged to protect him from all enemies.

The two sit cross-legged at a low table, and the shepherd spreads out a meal — a simple supper that somehow tastes better than any our traveler has ever had: a steaming lamb stew, soft pita bread, succulent dates. In a timeless gesture of honor, the host pours a flask of fragrant oil over the guest's head, and pours wine into his cup until it overflows.

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The fears of night have been transformed; where there had once been aching terror, there is now serenity and trust.

Earlier on, the psalmist has written, “He restores my soul.” Now, this line may sound at first like it doesn't belong in this scenario, but consider what the ancient Hebrews mean by *nefesh*, or soul. They didn't hold that Greek idea that's second nature to us, of a division between body and soul. The soul, in Hebrew thinking, is more like a person's essence, or life-force. It is, in many ways, life itself. For the lost-and-found traveler to say the shepherd “restores his soul” is to say something along the lines of “he saved my life.”

“Out there, lost in the backcountry, I was as good as dead. But then I came upon this shepherd — or, he came upon me — and, as soon as I saw him, I knew I wasn't a goner.”

Such is the power of desert hospitality. Perhaps it was this hospitality that David — or whoever wrote this psalm — once felt, on an occasion when he was lost and hopeless: and when a shepherd saved *him*. When the writer sets out to communicate the unfailing nature of God's love, it's this story of being lost in the desert that comes to mind. So moving was this experience, so unforgettable this rescue from the very jaws of death, that the writer comes to see it as symbolic of God's love: “The Lord is my shepherd,” who brings me out of the dark valley and

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onto the right path.

In his commentary on the twenty-third psalm, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a little story from the Talmud — that learned commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures. A traveler comes up to a child along the road and asks, “Is there a shortcut to such-and-such a village?”

To which the child replies, “There is a shortcut that is long, and a long way that is short.” [*The Lord Is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the 23rd Psalm* (Knopf, 2003), p. 72.]

Now, that answer may sound like so much nonsense, but in fact there’s a lot of truth in it. How many shortcuts do we take in life that end up being no shortcuts at all? They turn out to be longer and more painful than we ever imagined.

We’ve all had the experience of examining a road map and picking out a slender, colored line that appears to cut off a big bend in the highway. It looks too good to be true: and, as it turns out, it is. The alternate route’s got twists and turns and traffic lights; potholes and places permanently under construction. What looked to be an alluring and easy shortcut is a nightmare of delays.

Sometimes, a shortcut is not the road to take. Sometimes, only “the right paths” will do.

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One of the best-known names of the mid-twentieth century is a name that's nearly forgotten today. He was one of the most distinguished Christian ethical voices of the twentieth century. His name was Dag Hammarskjöld. He was a Swedish Christian, and Secretary-General of the United Nations. He died tragically, in 1962, in an airplane crash in Africa.

Hammarskjöld was trying, at the time, to negotiate a peace treaty between two bitter enemies. There were some who feared his death might not have been an accident. Expert investigators were dispatched to the scene, to try to discover what had gone wrong.

The investigators did their typically thorough job. They picked over the wreckage of the plane, looking for signs of mechanical failure — and found none. They checked out the weather forecasts for that day: had there been any wind shear, or an unexpected thunderstorm? They even checked the medical records of the pilot, to see if he could have suffered a heart attack. But none of these factors turned out to be the reason for the crash.

What the investigators discovered was this: the pilot was working from the wrong “approach plate,” as it's called. An approach plate is a specialized map, detailing the locations of the runways at an airport. The pilot had, in the cockpit that day, an approach plate for Endola airport, located in the Congo. The airport he

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was actually flying into was Endola, Zambia. There was a fatal altitude difference of 3,000 feet, which meant the Secretary-General's plane literally flew into the ground, short of the runway.

Technically the cause of the crash was pilot error — but it wasn't the sort of error that could have been prevented by thorough training. The pilot of Dag Hammarskjöld's plane was an expert, one of the best in the world. The problem was, someone had handed him the wrong approach plate. He did everything right, according to the map that was before him. But the map did not reflect the actual territory.

You've got to be on the right path, in life.

There are some, today, who claim that truth is relative; that there are no objective moral standards; that everyone ought to be free to do whatever makes them happy, so long as they're not hurting anyone else. But that's not the way God has designed the world, nor we who inhabit it. The Lord has decreed that there are such things as "right paths." Gently but firmly, the Lord who is our shepherd leads us along those paths, to the end that God's name may be glorified.

"For the gate is narrow," says our Lord, Jesus Christ, in Matthew 7:14. "The road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

What we need is someone who knows the land: someone who's walked over

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hill and dale who can show us the way. What we need is a shepherd: a good shepherd.

“I am the good shepherd,” says Jesus, in John Chapter 10, today’s Gospel lesson. “I know my own and my own know me.... And I lay down my life for the sheep.”

With a shepherd like that, wouldn’t you want to dwell in his house your whole life long?

Let us pray:

**Lord, lead us, we pray.
Lead us on the right paths, for your name’s sake.
Should we find ourselves on the wrong path,
give us courage to change.
May we fear nothing in life so much
as the consequences of defying your will;
and, may we desire nothing in life so much
as your loving embrace,
as you graciously welcome us home.**

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