

WHO'S MY SHEPHERD?

Psalm 23

If you haven't listened to our latest podcast, *Chapel Chat*, I want to encourage you to do so (here goes a little shameless advertising). One of our elders was kind enough to sit down with me and graciously and patiently answered my rambling questions about her faith journey. Of the many profound things she shared, one thing struck me in particular that day as she recalled how biblical texts and hymns had "seeped into her bones" since she was a little girl. It made me remember the hymns that seeped into my mother's bones, which my mom continued to sing long after dementia had erased most of her life's memories.

I wonder which words from Scripture, from our *Glory to God* hymnal, or from our liturgy, have seeped into your bones and become part of who you are? The *Doxology*, perhaps? "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be. World without end." The words of *Amazing Grace*, perhaps? "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." Or the words of the apostle Paul's great promise that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord?"

As for me, and the things that have seeped into my bones—"I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art"—comes to mind. It comes from the great Reformation hymn which we used to sing at each convocation in *Shelton Chapel* at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, my alma mater. "The Lord's Prayer" comes to mind as well, whose words we all recite together with one heart and one voice every Sunday morning. And of course Psalm 23 comes to mind, which I had to memorize—reluctantly—in confirmation class a long time ago.

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Whoever wrote these words thousands of years ago was somebody who had great faith, yet also knew something about adversities in his or her life. When life and faith intersect in times of struggle, our assumptions that seeped deep in our bones about how life *should* be and how God *ought* to be at work in the world are often not in accord with one another. The psalmist knew that life can sometimes challenge us to the point we feel stuck. When we don't know where to turn anymore. Where everything we try to say or do comes to naught. Where life itself hangs in the balance and sometimes is lost. Where we might question our faith,

wondering whether it makes any difference at all what we believe. Wondering whether God has forsaken us. Or if there even *is* a God.... Both the Psalmist and Jesus cry out in desperation for God's presence, only to be met with devastating silence.

When I saw traumatized women, children, and men emerge from the Asov steel plant in *Mariupol* last week, after they had cowered there for over two months without seeing any daylight, not knowing whether they would starve or live, constantly being bombarded by Russian shells, I wondered what sustained them during that time. Did God sustain the weary with a word, as the great prophet Isaiah once promised (Is. 50:4)? Did they carry biblical words deep in their bones that got them through many a dark night?

Now, our own traumas may be different than the scars of war, but we are often traumatized nonetheless. And by trauma, I mean how the roadmap of our lives—our hopes and dreams for ourselves, for our children, for our country, for our work—can be obliterated by a pandemic, an illness, by violence, a war, a tanking stock market. In such moments it feels like life as we had envisioned it for ourselves will never ever return. If we try to re-construct that old life, to return to the “security” of our life and faith as we once knew it, we may become traumatized. We may find ourselves like the proverbial hamster inside an ever-turning wheel that seems to go no where. Instead, we may be called to construct a new story for our lives which leaves our unfulfilled yearnings and losses behind. This is exactly the point, I think, at which the Psalmist penned these unforgettable words—as he constructs a future story of hope about life and faith after he, or she, experienced trauma. It is no coincidence that today's reading of Psalm 23 in our lectionary follows the trauma of Jesus's crucifixion, day in the tomb, and resurrection, as Jesus's old life meets a violent end only to be resurrected to a new life while still bearing the wounds of his previous one.

The LORD is my shepherd.

In this way, Psalm 23 almost reads like the beginning of an ancient twelve step program. First, we need to recognize that we cannot go back to the way things used to be. We are powerless and have to give up the illusion that we can control our lives. And second, we must hold fast to the belief that a power greater than ourselves, God, can restore our lives to hope and meaning. No other power can. No other philosophy or ideology. No autocrat, dictator, political system or social movement can accomplish this.

The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want.

This is the foundation of our faith. A few years ago, I was working with a group of clergy in which everyone had to write a statement of faith and present it. These statements are really boring because everyone expects us to say something about the Trinity, the Bible, the sacraments ... you know, the “greatest hits” in no less than a page, single-spaced. So when it was my turn to present my faith statement, I only wrote one line: “Jesus is Lord, everything else is commentary.” As you can imagine, this led to an interesting conversation about the “deep bones” of life and faith.

I was not being flippant about what I wrote. I meant every word, and I still do. If I—if we—cannot acknowledge that “The LORD is my shepherd,” that “Jesus Christ is Lord,” we might as well save our breath talking about anything else. But if we make such a profession, and if we mean it, we will recognize that we indeed have nothing we lack. Instead, God opens up a whole new world for us, pulls us out and up from the traumas of our lives and helps us construct a future story of hope—one that involves green pastures and still waters, strength in the face of whatever opposes us, nourishment at the Lord’s table, goodness and mercy, as many days as we shall live. This is also God’s baptismal promise to all of us.

The profession “The LORD is my shepherd” is not a romantic notion. It is deeply rooted in real life, with real challenges and, sometimes, real casualties. Our new lives, our own “mini resurrections” in this life, do not come easy. Just as Jesus bore the wounds of the violence done to him after his resurrection, we also carry our own wounds—physical, emotional, spiritual—over into our own resurrected lives. But these wounds in our life and faith will be healed, and in the end every tear will be wiped from our eyes. That is God’s great promise for us and for the world. Which leaves us with only one question:

Who is our shepherd?