Sermon for Sunday March 22, 2020 Dave Rodrick

For today’s psalm, the Lectionary provides a gift for this moment we are living through. It’s good to read it aloud, as we would say it together on a Sunday morning.

**Psalm 23**

**1 The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not be in want.**

**2 He makes me lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters.**

**3 He revives my soul
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.**

**4 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.**

**5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.**

**6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.**

For millions of us, these familiar words are like hearing a beloved piece of music that never gets old. That’s as is should be. But in times of unprecedented uncertainty and anxiety, we find ourselves looking more closely at many things we thought we knew. And looking more closely at some of the moments in this psalm, we can find a source of strength in the midst of struggle, as well as inner comfort and consolation.

**He revives my soul**

Translated literally, this familiar verse would read: “He brings back my life’s breath.”

The poets and prophets of the Hebrew Bible do not separate soul and body, in the way our culture has come to do. For them, God’s saving action is very physical, vividly present to our flesh and blood and bone. When fear or fatigue or something else has taken the wind out of me, God restores the strength of my body, the pulse of my life.

God does not just comfort and protect at a disembodied distance. God is active in every breath we take.

**Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; for you are with me.**

There is a powerful message in these words that has nothing to do with translation. It’s there in the English words, but so obvious that I’ve looked at it for decades without noticing it. When we enter the valley of the shadow of death, our relationship with God changes. No longer a descriptive ‘he’, God is addressed for the first time as a very personal ‘you’. From this point on, instead of describing God at a distance, the psalmist speaks to God directly. You protect me, you welcome me, you provide.

It’s also important to recognize that this greater intimacy happens not only in the face of death. The exact translation here is: “the valley of deep darkness”. Death is implied, but much else is included. Whenever we are in a place of great fear, confusion, hopelessness, we reach out to God with a new urgency. And our faith teaches that when we draw near to God, God will draw near to us. (James 4:8)

**Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life**

There is a gentleness in these words that offers comfort. But here, again, the original language carries added meaning that I find even more comforting in this time we are living in. The word translated as ‘mercy’ appears throughout the Hebrew Bible, and is more often translated “steadfast love”. God’s steadfast love. The love that never changes, that cannot be shaken, that holds fast in time of joy and of disaster. (And the Bible never tries to sugarcoat the reality that we *will* face those times.) God’s steadfast love is a powerful mountain of a word; yet in this psalm, the mountain moves. It follows us; it remains with us.

Actually it does more than just follow. “Follow” is too casual, too passive for what the psalmist actually says: God’s steadfast love *pursues* us. It never leaves us, never gives up on us. On days when we sense God’s presence, and in times when it can feel like God has abandoned us, the steadfast love of God moves with us. Every day of our life. Amen.