

Even with the high rate of biblical illiteracy in our culture, everybody seems to know and be able to repeat at least phrases from the 23rd Psalm. On September 11, 2001, on the fated Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania, the heroic passenger Todd Beamer and a cell phone operator recited Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer. In an article for the Society of Biblical Literature called "Through the Pistol Smoke Dimly: Psalm 23 in Contemporary Film and Song", Karl Jacobsen lists ten popular songs and seven contemporary films that make use of the language or imagery of Psalm 23. And when I say "popular songs," I mean by artists like Kanye West and Puff Daddy and Megadeth, not Peter Mayer or Allison Krauss. This is a psalm that has truly worked its way into our collective poetry bank.

Psalm 23 is what's called a psalm of *trust*. The psalms of trust may have developed from the psalms of lament, because they share an awareness of threat and hope in God. They speak with the voice of an old soul, someone for whom the current trouble is not their first rodeo. They have been through dark valleys before, they've experienced God's steadfast love in the midst of suffering before, and they so trust -- even though the dangers are very real.

The writer Madeleine L'Engle tells this story about the place of the 23rd Psalm in our collective lives. It's

about a house party in one of the big English country houses. Often after dinner at these parties people give recitations, sing, and use whatever talent they have to entertain the company. One year a famous actor was among the guests. I've been told he might have been Charles Laughton. When it came his turn to perform, he recited the Twenty-third Psalm, perhaps the most beloved psalm in the Psalter. The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want. His rendition was magnificent, and there was much applause. At the end of the evening someone noticed a little old great aunt dozing in the corner. She was deaf as a post and has missed most of what was going on, but she was urged to get up and recite something. In those days people used to memorize a lot

of poetry! So she stood up, and in her quavery old voice she started, The Lord is my Shepherd, and went on to the end of the psalm. When she had finished there was tears in many eyes. Later one of the guests approached the famous actor. 'You recited that psalm absolutely superbly. It was incomparable. So why were we so moved by that funny, little old lady?'

"He replied, 'I know the psalm. She knows the shepherd.'"

In his article, "Through the Pistol Smoke," Jacobsen argues that the artists who have appropriated some of Psalm 23 for their work are doing the same thing that it does: their references to . . . this great psalm of trust are illustrative of, and . . . committed to, the present realities in our world, realities that demand to be acknowledged, realities in which trust may not be the leading voice, realities in which the transition from trust...to lament...to trust is paced out . . . through the steps of the one who trudges through death's shadowy valley. <https://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=796> They are dealing with Walter Brueggemann's "disorientation," the time when the rug is pulled out from under you and you ask, "How long, O Lord?" and they engage the assurances of Psalm 23 in a challenging way, or an ironic way. They lament, and they ask if trust is possible again, a question that isn't pre-answered by being asked in a religious context. By engaging that disorientation, by expressing a mistrust that is in tension with the trust of the psalm, these songs and movies refuse to be let go short of any result other than a true blessing. The expression of lament or mistrust is just like Jacob, wrestling with the angel and refusing to let go until the angel blesses him: it's confrontative *and* ultimately faithful. In a challenging kind of way.

Rabbi Harold Kushner says that "The twenty-third Psalm is the answer to the question, "How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world?" The psalmist is not saying, "I will fear no evil because evil only happens to people who

deserve it.” He’s saying, “This is a scary, out-of-control world, but it doesn’t scare me, because I know that God is on my side, not on the side of whatever terrible thing is happening.” But you only know it because you’ve been through this valley before.

So take a closer look at the psalm. I think especially today, the way it starts out just slows us down, makes us stop and listen. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” reminds me that we live in abundance, not in scarcity. “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” He gives me back my life. The first lines re-ground those of us who get wound up and flitter around trying to save the universe in time for bed.

God sets a table before me in the presence of my enemies. This is quite something. A table for me, good, my enemies right there, bad. But true, right? The enemies—illness, injustice, bills, scary people—don’t magically melt away out of our lives. And we need to eat. You can’t wait to eat until all your problems are solved, right? No, you can’t. So God sets the table before us in the presence of our enemies. Sit, eat, deal with the enemies after dinner. Maybe they won’t look so bad on a full stomach; maybe you’ll have more strength to deal with them. The point is, God is relaxed enough to prepare a table before you, so who are you to be in fight or flight mode?

And finally, in verse 6, goodness and mercy do not just “follow.” They *pursue*. According to the *New Interpreter’s Bible*, the Hebrew verb...has the more active sense of “pursue.” Usually in the psalms it’s the enemies who pursue you, but in this one, goodness and mercy are at your back. Again, we are old enough and carry enough scars to know that there is no permanent elimination of problems

and threats and grief. That's a fairy tale. But goodness and mercy don't just lag behind us, watching the carnage. They pursue us, God's active engagement with the forces of death and destruction, never flagging. Goodness and mercy pursue us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord all our lives.

The world in which we live, lovely as it is, can be very depleting to our souls. I met with a young woman some time ago who was pretty late for the meeting, and when we were finally together, she told me that she'd lost her appointment calendar. I won't go into all the back story, but I know that she has a pattern of doing that—not showing up, or showing up late. So I kind of didn't believe her that she'd lost her calendar; I hypothesized that she had tried in some ineffective way to engage in self-care, and had not been able to meet her obligation to me in a timely way, but was too ashamed or afraid to be honest. It's quite a hypothesis, and I'm aware that I could be way wrong, but just take my word that it was a strong hunch. I didn't tell her I didn't believe her, either, because it didn't seem like that would play out constructively. We just got on with our business. But I bring it up because I really do think that this young woman was coping with a depleted soul, and part of the problem was that she was trying to fix it alone and not expose her depletion to anybody else. She was hoping she'd fill up again before she'd been late to enough meetings that people would see that about her.

Psalm 23 offers us some wisdom about how to be in a world that often depletes you. For one thing, stop and ponder the fundamental truth: the Lord is our shepherd. Just stop and let that sink in. Stay stopped for a while. Things won't get totally out of control while you ponder. For another thing, eat, even in the presence

of enemies. Okay, I don't think this means eat a gallon of ice cream for comfort when you're not physically hungry, but God offers us what we need to stay healthy even when the enemy is too close for comfort. Food, but also friends and art and birds and gardens and music. Play. I have an email out to Sr. Rosemary who led the "Art Journaling" retreat I went to in Racine, because she teaches you how to make play into prayer, which is a fundamental spiritual lesson we must learn. And then also, remember that goodness and mercy are hot on your trail, pursuing you no matter where you go, to the depths of despair or the pinnacles of loneliness.

Goodness and mercy pursue us all the days of our lives, and we dwell in the house of the Lord our whole lives long.

Shepherd of the people of creation, we pray to you today. Take into your care all who are struggling. Direct for us the paths we walk that we might know blessing in life and be a blessing to others through our actions and our inactions. Amen.