

I don't need anything else

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A folk-singing friend taught me that if I could link a sermon to a song, listeners would remember the song, and thus be more likely to remember the sermon. Music resides in a part of the brain that is resistant to amnesia, he said. Putting the 23rd Psalm in this Sunday's readings to music gives us preachers an opportunity to help the congregation rediscover this psalm and its power.

- "The Lord is my shepherd." Invite the congregation to imagine itself as a collective disciple. Let the psalm speak first to "ya'll" as a single body—perhaps as the "I" who is the singer. Imagine what would happen if the congregation were able to live the faith it sings. In the ancient Near East it was commonplace to speak of kings, pharaohs and caesars as the "shepherds of the people." This is political speech. The church is called to place its primary trust not in princes but in its risen Lord. Remember the consequences of this for the Confessing Church in Germany in the 1930s when it took the 23rd Psalm seriously. What would happen if we not only sing but also live this psalm?
- "I shall not want." The congregation sings that it does not need anything else, but this claim counters a culture that preaches that salvation comes from consuming as much as possible and from relying upon military might. Imagine the shape of a church that has this single verse as its mission statement. What does a congregation that "does not want" look like?
- "Even though I walk through the darkest valley." The Hebrew word for "valley" here is better read as "gully" or "crevice." When I mention this in a sermon, I notice that the room becomes very quiet. I don't illustrate. I don't tell stories. I just say, "More than a few of us know this dark gully only too well. Some of us are deep in such a crevice this morning even though it may be hidden beneath our apparent ease and smiles." At that moment you can hear a pin drop. It tells me that the truth

has been told. Of course it is not just individuals but also many congregations in North America that find themselves closer to the dark valley than to the green pastures these days. The fact that the psalm names the valley of Good Friday reveals that the 23rd Psalm is not a sentimental cliché but instead a brazen declaration of faith sung into the teeth of despair.

- “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me.” The Hebrew word for “follow” is actually the word “pursue.” Suddenly goodness and mercy are not like two little puppies following close behind, tails wagging. Now goodness and mercy are the hounds of heaven pursuing lost souls and lost congregations. In the closing scenes of *Dead Man Walking*, Sister Helen hears the confession of a brutal killer. She has been unsuccessfully hunting him with grace, but now, as he walks to his death, love finally catches him and redeems him. Imagine a congregation that does not see obvious signs of goodness and mercy close on its heels. Now preach that the psalm is not about the obvious. It sings a daring song of hope: “Surely good and mercy shall pursue me. . .and, finally, catch me.”

Let the congregation be reminded of all of this whenever it sings its favorite psalm.