

God provides

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William Sloane Coffin once noted that just as there is ultimately only one hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," there is also only one psalm, the 23rd. You might select a different hymn, but the psalm that is on the hearts and lips of most believers—and even those who reside at the edges of our communities, emerging only on rare occasions—is the 23rd.

Why do the words of this psalm resonate with our deepest fears and desires? Why does it continue to sing of God's presence to us? There is a power in this psalm. Like "Amazing Grace," it belongs to the inclusive community of which our weekly worshiping congregation is only a subset. In its simplicity, the 23rd Psalm is profound.

The 23rd Psalm is frequently read at memorial services, but it speaks of life as well as death, and especially of the Lord of life: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." God provides for us. We know this, but sometimes we forget. Those who prayed this psalm remembered their history: in 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, Israel lacked nothing. Each day, God provided enough for that day. In a time of economic anxiety, this affirmation of God's providence is helpful.

Here we're wading into the subject of trust, so it's necessary to name the abuses of trust present in our culture and in the community of faith. The term "shepherd" is often a reference to royalty: the rod and the staff are the signs of office, and God led Israel through the wilderness as a shepherd leads sheep. Rulers are supposed to shepherd and care for their people. Yet the abuses of power that have harmed our communities give us pause: who is worthy of our trust?

Also relevant is the human temptation to create idols, alternate sources of security: the company, our professions, our retirement accounts, our middle- or upper-middle-class ways of life. When these sources of security are called into question, where do we place our trust?

Because the Lord is our shepherd, we have all that we need. God provides.

This phrase strikes a deep chord as well: the Lord "prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies." The Lord provides a place of safety. A few years ago I was meeting with a group of people and struggling with the meaning and mission of the church of Jesus. We were a new congregation, and we were attracting people who had been away from church for some time. Some had moved through a difficult experience that had distanced them from the church. As we developed a mission statement, one of the words that came to the surface was "safety." I didn't quite grasp the meaning at first. But others were insistent: the church needed to be a safe place.

People are looking for sanctuary. They are searching for a community that embodies the qualities of the shepherd who watches over, protects, provides for and creates a safe place for those under his care. In years past, the Christian witness has been compromised because the larger church has not always been a safe place for children and youth. People instinctively realize that when God is with us, we are in a safe place, a sanctuary.

In a violent culture, it is understandable that the creation of a sanctuary represents a risk, but we also remember that the good shepherd "lays down his life for the sheep." The familiar psalm that seems so accessible is in fact edgy, even radical—it pierces into our deepest vulnerabilities and fears.