

April 26, Fourth Sunday of Easter: Psalm 23

## **When I pray the words of Psalm 23, the “you” I address them to is God. But I hope others will overhear.**

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [April 15, 2015](#) issue

Several years ago, a neighbor of mine gave me a birdhouse. It was the perfect size and structure for bluebirds to build their nests inside. I put it on a wood post in the yard, which turned out to be a bad idea. Neighborhood cats dug their claws into the wood and climbed up to kill the newborn chicks. The nest became a grave.

I bought a metal pole to replace the wood post. The bluebird couple came back, rebuilt their nest, made some babies, and took turns sheltering their chicks while the other scavenged for food.

This is what hope looks like, stubborn hope—like the way bluebirds come back and make space for life in the midst of a world of death. That’s what the gospel is all about: that God makes room for eternal life to grow, for divine love to multiply even in the worst conditions, even in the valley of the shadow of death. The hope of Easter is that not even crucifixion can put an end to God’s work of making space for life in the world. God turns a grave into a place for new birth. God is stubborn for hope, stubborn for life.

The Christian life is all about nesting—about creating a home for the gospel, a shelter for hope and joy and all things good. We are people who build nests wherever we go, wherever we happen to settle for a season. We know that God has always been mobile, living in a tent, providing the people of God a sanctuary in the wilderness. With violence and hostility and wild destruction all around us, we learn to pray the words of the psalmist: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.”

I remember sitting in a hospital room with a man from my congregation who was recovering from a severe stroke. He was telling me about all the other people from

church who had visited him that week—several congregants who brought their hymnals and sang with him, another who brought his fiddle and played Appalachian tunes, others who stopped by on lunch breaks or after work. All those churchpeople, he mumbled to me, made it easier to believe in God. When they are with me, he said, I know God is with me. There at his bedside, I learned from this man that I can't separate how I think about church from how I think about God. The life of a congregation reveals the life of God. "Christ is present to us," writes Herbert McCabe, "insofar as we are present to each other."

When I pray the words of Psalm 23, the "you" I address them to is God. But I hope others will overhear—that they will hear in the "you" an invitation to be with me, to be church for me, to become God's presence in my life. "I fear no evil; for you are with me." This is a prayer for companionship, for us to be drawn together, for our presence to be signs of God's presence and our love an incarnation of God's love.

The gospel can be summed up in the psalmist's word *with*—that God is with us, that we are with one another, and that we are with God when we are with one another. *With* involves the companionship of solidarity, and solidarity is at the heart of the gospel. As Dorothee Sölle puts it, "The best translation of what the early Christians called agape is still 'solidarity.'" God's love means solidarity, the embodied solidarity of God becoming flesh to get as close to us as possible, to be with us. And we find ourselves within God's life when we are drawn into the lives of others, friends and strangers, neighbors across the street or across an ocean.

Week after week, I listen to the prayers of my people—their grief at the loss of loved ones, their pleading for the end of racism, their petition for the end of the violence of guns and bombs, their call for God's justice and mercy. As I listen, I feel as if our world has stumbled into a valley of death. The psalmist knows this world. There is no promise here of life without enemies or evil. Instead, in the valley, surrounded by enemies, the psalmist sees a table—a place for fellowship and communion, for being with God and with one another. Around the table—that's where God happens.

As the church, we practice a stubborn hope, the stubbornness of building nests and setting up tables wherever we find ourselves—no matter how precarious our lives, no matter the threats from enemies. We do what God does: make room for people to grow into God's eternal life. The church is a nest where all are welcome to rest in God's love. It is a table where all are welcome to eat and drink God's life. In us, the body of Christ, God is made flesh, and we fear no evil.