

A psalm for the living

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In his years as a pastor my husband read the 23rd Psalm at the bedsides of quite a few people who were dying. It was the most frequently requested passage among those who were facing their own going and still able to choose. When I began to volunteer for hospice, I found, as he had, that even for people who had wandered far from church, even for the skeptical and the uncertain, even for those who were unused to prayer and didn't want to be prayed over, the 23rd Psalm provided a place of return that was beautiful, familiar, inviting, and reassuring.

I read it to my father as he lay dying, and later to my mother. I felt the tears come at the line about the valley of the shadow of death. They were people of faith, and they feared no evil. Some do fear it. Yet the simple assertion "I will fear no evil" seems to offer even them--the fearful, the anxious, the agitated--a mysterious comfort.

If one has learned any psalm by heart, it is likely to be this one. I learned it under my grandmother's gentle but demanding tutelage; she taught me what "anointed" means and patiently explained to me why "my cup runneth over" is a good thing, not a dismaying matter of leaving the tap on too long or spilling tea on the carpet.

And of course it's a psalm not just for the dying, but very much for the living. When I seek still waters, when I need restoration, when I need to remember that God is in charge and that protection is at hand, when immediacies are so discouraging and messy that I need to set my sights on the long term--the promise that I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever--I return to this psalm and its clear, sure, certain

affirmations of faith.

When I read or hear the 23rd Psalm, I still feel as though I'm coming home. Its opening declaration is simple and strong and confident. In periods of reflection I've thought about how a change of emphasis shifts its rich message. The *Lord* is my shepherd: no one else cares for me as he does. There may be others who think they can occupy that role, but I know the one who cares for me.

The Lord *is* my shepherd. This is not a historical statement; in this very moment, I am being shepherded and cared for.

The Lord is *my* shepherd. The one who shepherds me is immanently, intimately present; has created me, chosen me, and loved me with a love that will not let me go.

The Lord is *my shepherd*. There may be other metaphors that teach us about God, but this one offers its own valuable, irreplaceable teaching. Shepherds watch. They guard. They fight off predators. They laugh at sheep's stupidities and love them anyway. God is a shepherd, and this is good news indeed.