

“Sheep Without a Shepherd”

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According to Mosby’s Medical Dictionary, the definition of memory is the mental faculty or power that enables one to retain and to recall, through unconscious associative processes, previously experienced sensations, impressions, ideas, concepts, and all information that has been consciously learned.

Our Psalm today, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, is certainly one etched into all of our memories. Maybe some of you intentionally memorized the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm at one point or another, but more likely, we soaked up this super short psalm by osmosis. French Philosopher Denis Diderot reminds us that “we have an immense memory, present in us without our knowledge.” And for many of us, that’s where this psalm sits for us. Without our knowledge, it sits in our bodies, able to conveniently be called up in a time of need, particularly at a time of mourning. And as this Psalm is so etched into our collective being, I ask, does this psalm actually deliver its purpose all the time? Beyond our rote knowledge of this psalm, how much can we actually use it for comfort?

Please pray with me this prayer of St. Teresa of Avila, *“No need for fear or deep despair. Seekers of God, receive his care. No need for fear or deep despair. We are at home and God is there. Amen.”*

Although some clergy adopted the practice earlier, the Christian use of Psalm 23 at funerals derives mostly from the distribution of various volumes of the Book of Common Prayer. In America, the Episcopal Church introduced this psalm to its edition of the book in the early 1900s, specifically recommending it as a recitation for the burial of a child. From its place in these books, the prayer slowly gained traction until it became a staple of Christian funeral services.

While the reason for its popularity with the Jewish community cannot be pinpointed as accurately, the psalm is less popular at funerals (although it is used) and is often used as a personal prayer in times of sickness or distress.

Despite its deep roots, Psalm 23 has its detractors, as far as its use in memorial services is concerned. While Christian Evangelist Luis Palau agrees that the text offers personal reassurance, he contends that the psalm is better suited to dealing with present, worldly matters than with death. Palau interprets the phrase “the valley of the shadow of death” as the gloom of fear and distress cast over life.

Like Palau, the Jewish faithful often view the psalm as a reaffirmation of God's presence in day-to-day life, even -- or especially -- during times of turmoil. Maurice Lamm, author of "The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning," focuses on the image of God as a shepherd, noting that this image reaffirms God's constantly watchful presence and his concern with the goodwill of his followers.

So, let’s dive into that, for a bit, this idea that this Psalm speaks to life, to our lives.

Martin S. Cohen, the rabbi of Shelter Rock Jewish Center in Roslyn, NY, helps us understand what Psalm 23 means for life.

“Psalm 23, with its vivid portrait of yearning for and trust in God, is one of the most well-known chapters in the book of Psalms. In this psalm, the poet, David, lies down to sleep and dreams of himself as a lamb grappling with the exquisite ambivalence inherent in wanting to serve in God’s holy Temple, yet knowing that the lambs who serve God in that place usually do so by being slaughtered, by having their blood poured out as divinely ordained libations, and by having their lifeless carcasses burnt to ash.

Yet what can the poet do if not praise God? His life as a lamb, at least so far, has been good, and he feels deeply beholden to his Shepherd for all the blessings he enjoys, blessings that encompass everything a lamb could possibly need.

And what are these blessings precisely? Plenty of cool water to drink. Endless tracts of grassy pastureland in which to meander and graze. An ongoing regimen of healthy exercise under the watchful eye of a Guardian whose staff is there to fight off wolves, not to strike the sheep when the darkness of a mountain pass temporarily immobilizes them, with fear or when the contemplation of their destiny unnerves them and fills them with feelings of crippling anxiety.

Modern readers who feel similarly ambivalent about their own role in the service of God will find it easy to identify with the lamb’s dilemma. It is, after all, quite easy to *wish* to serve God because of the great blessings that come from currying favor with the divine realm, but it is another thing entirely to face the darker side of yearning for God and accept that there will be enormous challenges as a result of choosing to live a life in God.”

Rabbi Cohen eloquently puts the dilemma at the heart of this sermon: the dilemma between comfort, real comfort, and convenience.

Martha Spong’s poetic interpretation of Psalm 23, which we used in part for our call to worship opens as follows: “*Maybe you are my mother, working at your sewing machine to clothe me, picking me up at school when I have a fever, cautioning me when I don’t want you to (but usually later I appreciate it).*”

I use this because we are not an agricultural society. We do not have an agrarian way of life, and we certainly don’t have the best grasp on temple Judaism (unless there are any scholars out there and if there are, I have some questions for you).

So for this Psalm to totally make sense, in its original form or otherwise, we must adjust the images. And the understanding of comfort and convenience is clear when Spong says that a mother cautions her child when the child doesn’t want her to, but usually later appreciates it.

At least for me, it’s hard to fully imagine what is meant when David writes that your rod and staff, they comfort me. But there is at least some clarity in that image of our parent, and after all, God is our Shepherd and also our divine Parent.

So, there is this distinction between comfort and convenience and that is evident too in our Gospel lesson for the day.

Rev. Pete Peery, now retired President of the Montreat Conference Center, contextualizes the people that we meet in our Mark text today.

Like sheep without a shepherd. That is an echo from various experiences of the people of God in the Old Testament. It is heard in Moses' yearning for a successor so that the people may not be bereft of leadership in the desolation of the wilderness, "like sheep without a shepherd." (Numbers 27:17). It is heard in the Deutero-historian's reflection on life under the abominable reign of Ahab, as Ahab and Jezebel chased after idols rather than tending to the well-being of the people, leaving the people "scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd." (1 Kings 22:17). It is heard in Ezekiel's eschatological oracle offered to the people enduring exploitative leaders.

Sheep without a shepherd. Sheep with faithless shepherds distracted by idols that do not save, that do not provide for the life and well-being of the sheep. Sheep with exploitative shepherds who use the sheep for their own gain. Having sustained suffering and deep wounds at the hands of such shepherds, some of these sheep remain in the pews of present-day congregations but daring never to trust a shepherd again. Many others dwell beyond the bounds of our churches.

Jesus was confronted by a shepherdless crowd, a crowd lacking a true shepherd, a crowd whose leaders, Herod and the Pharisees, were not focused on the people's welfare but instead on their own agendas. These people chased after Jesus. Was it because of his many acts of healing and casting out demons? If so, he did not deliver what they expected. That is not the shepherd's job. As Karl Barth said, a good shepherd was one responsible for the sheep, one who acted on their behalf. However, that is quite different from giving them what they want.

Once again, we are struck by the difference between compassion, comfort, and convenience- a leader who will give us what we want. Like Rabbi Cohen reminded us in his interpretation of the Psalm, it is not just about who God is, but also about who WE are. The way that we turn away from our sins, the way that we choose a life where comfort is not convenience are there are not easy fixes to the problems of the soul.

Before our scripture reading, we prayed that our shepherd God would shape our leisure and our labor, that the world will recognize us as Jesus' disciples and our ministry as what you would have us do.

That is to say, a total reorienting of our lives so that we are not seen as shepherdless sheep, led by those who are guided by their own personal feelings. But Jesus is our shepherd. His stomach churns at our pain, at our trauma. He has compassion for us and is our ultimate healer.

And the fringe of his cloak can heal us. That proximity.