

Soul Psalms Psalm 23
A Sermon Preached by Amy M. Roon
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A college friend once posited that we were all preprogrammed with every episode of the Brady Bunch and that this is why, even if you'd never watched the show, you could only see episodes you were pretty sure you'd already seen. I didn't grow up with a television in the house so this remark made particular sense to me as I could come up with no other reason for it to be so true.

Psalm 23 is probably the only scripture I can refer to by book and chapter and still get a look of recognition from just about anyone. If they don't recognize the precise reference they'll say something like: "Is that the one...with the green pastures and the water? Yeah, yeah. I know that one."

It is as if Psalm 23 is preprogrammed into our memories. Even if you don't have it memorized you'll never be able to hear it as something you've never heard before. Your very first recollections of hearing it likely already contain a sense of remembering it. For many, many people this is their favorite psalm and perhaps their favorite scripture.

Which begs the question: Why? What is it about this brief poem that strikes such a chord with so many people?

Well for one thing it's well written. The balance and simplicity of the poetry speak through many, many translations with ease. It can be memorized without the nagging longing to surgically remove specific verses because they no longer feel relevant to a modern sensibility.

There is a balance of structure to the poem. Brueggeman points out that there is a basic movement from the third person Yahweh to the magisterial *thou* and back to the third person Yahweh. Unlike laments that cry "I am afraid" or words of salvation that say "Do not fear"; Psalm 23 sings "I will not fear." Instead of crying "Why have you forsaken me?" or hearing "I am with you"; Psalm 23 states simply and confidently "You are with me." In both statements, "I will not fear" and "You are with me" there is an implied understanding that the speaker knows something of fear and despair but is well aware that fear and despair are not the end.

As such, Psalm 23 is a psalm of orientation used, for most of us, when in deep distress or sadness. Like a homing beacon or an internal compass when we are lost in fear or grief we say the words "I will not fear for you are with me."

For me, this psalm is deeply entwined in my earliest memories of *using* scripture. I used to recite Psalm 23 when the darkness of my night bedroom harbored fearful creatures. I cannot hear these words with only my thinking self. Each phrase is too embedded in the feeling places of my heart.

It reminds me of my mom's advice to her new parents. She's a midwife and is often in the position of sending parents home with their first newborn child. In answer to the persistent question, "How will I know if..." She answers, "Your baby will teach you. Your baby knows everything you'll need to know."

She's right of course. Babies are quite gifted at being babies. In that first year of life parenting is much of a watching and witnessing exercise. You and your baby learn to communicate in a language you may never use again. A language of the heart, a conversation between gut instinct and gut instinct. A baby doesn't think about growth or development. It just happens.

As we get older, as quickly as the second and third year we move past the basic needs of being human and grow into greater and greater consciousness of ourselves, of our desires, and hopefully of other human beings. We speak more and more often with words and less and less often with only our body-selves. We spend the vast majority of our lives in this thinking-human place. Thinking about God. Thinking about Humanity. Thinking about what to do or not to do. Gradually equating thinking and competency ; equating what we can do or not do with our very humanity.

I learned a lot about faith from my grandparents. Some lessons they taught me intentionally...some they taught me from how they lived their lives...and a lasting lesson in how they aged, and how they died.

My grandfather came to this country from Holland in 1906, when he was 3 years old. Practicing his faith in the Christian Reformed tradition he worried when I began to study voice...because all those *operas* had such questionable characters and themes! Opera is all sex and violence! My earliest memories of him are entwined with the question: "And what would the Lord ask of you?" With no more than a High school education he was great reader and tutored inner-City Chicago youths well into his 80s. A determined chauvinist, even as his balance was unsteady on the Minnesota ice I had to pretend he was helping me, his granddaughter, to cross from the car to the house. As his eyesight and hearing grew worse and worse he became more and more worried and depressed. His sense of well-being and competency greatly in question. The faith that so enriched his life became his obstacle as his body gave way to the forces of aging.

My grandmother, on the other hand, when faced with the inevitable diminishing of her ability to do things for herself, was continually noticing how wonderfully she was cared for.

In watching them both I was struck by the struggle between a faith lived out in competent service to God and a faith lived out in trust that God will provide. Having spent most of our lives growing into competency, most of us don't like to give it up.

All of these observations coincided with the years leading up to and into seminary; a time when I was continually asked "So what are your plans? What are you working towards? What are you going to *do* with your life?"

After hearing this question for the 500th time I began to tell the truth. I'm practicing. I've seen two different ways to grow old and realized that unless I make a serious course correction I'm going to be miserable when I'm 80. So I'm practicing being content. I'm practicing being joyful in things I did not do for myself. I am practicing living my life in a way that when days come that I can no longer do things for myself or others that I can still find joy and delight in being cared *for*. And I figure I'm going to need the next 50 years to get good enough at this that it comes without thinking. If God loves me for being the simple human that I am; I am trying to remember what it means to be simply human. I'm trying to remember that being human does not require extra effort on my part and that I do not get extra points for finesse.

In the darkness of his 90s my grandfather seemed to recite the 23rd Psalm continually looking for guidance, anxious that it was his responsibility to discern and walk the path God had laid out for him.

My grandmother would simply hear the words and allow herself to be comforted.

"I will not fear for you are with me."

Like a homing beacon in the broken, inept, forsaken places of our lives we sing this psalm so our hearts can remember that infant place that never required our cognition to be loved. This is the God-compass leading us home; the current that carries us to shore; the unexpected bounty of the wilderness.

We teach this psalm to children as a comfort and assurance of God's love for them and recite it at funerals and memorials to remind us of what we learned as children.

There is, of course, no "right time" to die. Not if it comes quickly or takes a long time. Not if it is unexpected or if our end is known. Not if I die young or if I live to be a hundred. If it were up to my conscious mind I would just continue to problem solve my way into living forever. I would cure death and we would all be done for. And so like birth, our conscious minds are not required for dying.

I have memories that go back a long time, back to 2 or 3 years of age. But of that first year of life? Learning to suckle or to smile? To hold myself upright? I have no memories of wanting to crawl or walk. Life required no planning on my part for me to exist. While I can think about breathing; thinking about it is not required.

Death will require no planning for my parting. Whenever that time comes no conscious mind is ready. And any conscious planning is for or in response to the living.

As God guided my unknowing self into this world; so God will lead me home.

With apologies, Catherine, I have never thought this Psalm was about sheep *or* shepherds.

This psalm is the love-song of our hearts, sung to God with every assurance that God is singing it back to us. Indeed it was God who taught us this lullaby before we ourselves could sing.

(Sung)

Surely, goodness and kindness will follow me,
All the days of my life,
And I will live in her house,
Forever, and ever, amen.