

Pursued by God

Psalm 23: Easter 4 Yr A

May the words of my mouth...

The readings for the 4th Sunday of Easter feature many metaphors important to our understanding of our faith: a banquet meal with overflowing cups, green pastures and still waters, pathways, shepherds, sheepfolds, sheep and gates, thieves and bandits, and houses. Since this is the 3rd time in the past 6 years I have drawn these readings to preach about, I wonder if someone thinks I still haven't got it right. I would like to talk briefly, today, about the 23rd Psalm, surely the most familiar of the psalms, which is structured around the metaphor of the shepherd.

Our Prayer Book psalms, much cherished masterpieces of the English prose, have a long history. They are a revision of the psalms of the sixteenth century Elizabethan prayer book, which in turn were revisions of the psalms of the 1539 Coverdale Bible. The Coverdale Bible was an English translation of Jerome's Latin Bible of the 5th century. Jerome's Latin Bible was translated from the 3rd century BCE Greek Septuagint; the Septuagint was a translation of the Hebrew text, probably written around the time of the Exile in the 6th Century BCE. A revision of a revision of a translation of a translation of a translation. And to complicate things further, the BCP 23rd Psalm differs from the version we may have learned as children, the King James version.

The metaphor of shepherd frequently has a royal connotations, and shapes the entire 23rd Psalm. The king was the shepherd of his people.

As a child, the phrase from the King James Version, "shepherd I shall not want," always puzzled me. Why would we not want a good shepherd? As used in the Psalm, "want" is synonymous with "lack" or "to be in need of." But I'm not sure my childhood reading of not wanting the good shepherd, is entirely wrong, at least for me. As Bishop Sandy, and

Bishop Greg, know, I sometimes have an aversion to being shepherded. That may be true for you too. Fortunately, our temporal shepherds, like our God, do not give up on us.

The concluding phrase “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever,” suggests an eschatological theme: what happens at our death and at the end of time. For this reason, the 23rd Psalm is often read at funerals. Indeed the BCP includes, in the Rite 1 Burial Service, the King James version of Psalm 23. This concluding metaphor of living in God’s house suggests that the focus of the psalm is our hope about our life after death, our resurrection life. We read this eschatological perspective back into the entire Psalm and find great comfort in it.

But there are other readings of this Psalm. Part of the great richness of scripture is that there are often alternative readings, other voices that we can hear, especially in poetic writings such as the Psalms. When metaphors are central to a passage, there is almost always more than one possible interpretation. These other voices enrich us because they open us to new possibilities of meaning, deeper levels of meaning.

Robert Alter, a contemporary Hebrew scholar, writer and poet, has translated the Psalms in a manner that endeavors to reflect more closely the Hebrew original text, the poetic form, economy of language, and rhythm.

Alter avoids unnecessary use of terms that have a unique Christian meaning, words such as “salvation”, “soul”, and “Holy Spirit”. There is a long tradition in the Church of reading the psalms as if they were written about Christ, and the use of terms such as salvation, soul and Holy Spirit, furthers a Christian reading. But “Holy Spirit” as a component of the Trinity, salvation through Christ’s death, and the soul as something distinct from the body, were not Hebrew concepts. I’m not suggesting that reading Christian meanings into the psalms is wrong. Indeed, in the

Gospels Christ quotes from the Psalms. But we miss much of the richness of the Psalms if we overlook the original meaning reflected in the Hebrew.

Now I know that messing with the 23rd Psalm is akin to messing with the Lord's Prayer. But at Christ Church we're already in for a dime with the Lord's Prayer, so lets go for a dollar with the 23rd Psalm.

Listen to Alter's translation:

The Lord is my shepherd,

I shall not want.

In grass meadows He makes me lie down,

by quiet waters guides me.

My life He brings back.

He leads me on pathways of justice

for his name's sake.

Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow,

I fear no harm, for You are with me.

Your rod and Your staff—

it is they that console me.

You set out a table before me

in the face of my foes.

You moisten my head with oil,

my cup overflows.

Let but goodness and kindness pursue me

all the days of my life.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

for many long days.

Alter's version is similar to the BCP, particularly the first five verses and in the expression of the strong metaphor of the shepherd. But there are differences.

The concluding verse of the Prayer Book and King James versions is, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever". Alter's version is "dwell in the house of the Lord for many long days," (which is the language found in a majority of the contemporary translations.)

"Many long days" gives the Psalm a this-worldly flavor, and opens our eyes to read the psalm as describing what we can experience in this life. This reading is consistent with Israel's theology at the time of the Exile in that they had not yet articulated a concept of life after death. Understood as a description of what we can experience in this life, metaphors of the banquet table set before us, our hair moisten with oil and cup of wine overflowing, suggest the abundance of God's steadfast love, mercy and blessing that we can experience as we live out our lives.

Another difference between the Prayer Book and the Alter versions relates to who is the actor in the 23rd Psalm. Is the Psalm all about us, our search for God, our spiritual journey? That is what our culture would teach us. Aren't we all supposed to be pursuing our own spiritual journey? We might hear the phrase, "goodness and mercy shall follow us," as a suggestion of our reward for our successful search for God.

Abraham Herschel, the noted Jewish theologian of the 20th century, suggests that the Hebrew scriptures are not about our search for God, but rather, about God in search for us. Heschel says goodness and mercy are divine gifts, seen throughout the entire Hebrew Scriptures, even before the creation of humankind.

Robert Alter's translation says "Let but goodness and kindness

pursue us.” Imagine that: God pursuing us with steadfast love, goodness and kindness.

How does it feel to think of God pursuing us? Isn't that wonderful, comforting thought one of the reasons we find such meaning and comfort in the praying the 23rd Psalm?

I want to reiterate that I'm suggesting an alternate way to read the Psalm, not necessarily better or worse than the traditional reading.

All three of our readings today can also be heard as describing promises with which God pursues us and which God offers us in the here and now. In Acts the Holy Spirit filled the hearts of the early followers and a community was created of people who share everything with glad and generous hearts. In the Epistle of I Peter, Jesus is portrayed as suffering and dying that we might live for righteousness. And in our Gospel reading from John 10, Jesus is also the good shepherd who leads and protects his sheep.

God seeks to have us as a part of his kingdom, the Kingdom of God, which is present now and is yet to come. God pursues us with salvation, a new life in Christ, an opportunity now to abide in Christ. The promise of one flock and one shepherd is what all followers of Christ can experience as members of Christ's church.

A reading of the 23rd Psalm as a description of the untold blessings with which God pursues us and offers us now, is exactly what we have in our resurrection life in Christ. And that indeed is good news.

AMEN

Dale Ramerman

May 11, 2014, Christ Episcopal Church, Anacortes; Psalm 23; Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10;