

**“The 23rd Psalm” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
Unitarian Church of Edmonton, November 9, 2008**

This Sunday falls at a time when many are pondering one of Canada’s most recited poems:

In Flanders Fields

by John McCrae, May 1915

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep,
though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

I am not sure if it was a conscious intent of mine, but in thinking ahead and planning November services I chose today to ponder another poem deeply associated with death, the 23rd Psalm. Perhaps the subject is just on my mind, for this Tuesday is also the anniversary of my mother’s death.

The Psalm of David is a key feature of the Jewish tradition. It is part of the Shabbat rituals, recited at one of the Saturday meals. It is also part of the Jewish funeral service. And I can’t imagine there are many here today who have not heard it recited at a funeral or memorial, often in this church. For people of a Christian mind set, it is seen as one of the great hymns of comfort.

To quote one young conservative Christian author, Barksdale M. Pullen III: A few months ago my father passed away rather suddenly at the age of 43. It was one of those experiences where emotions run high and mixed, feelings of sadness, and loss; and also happiness and joy for our Christian family, because we know he is in heaven in the presence of the Lord. My father left me many things, but one I have grown to appreciate was his Bible, full of notes and markings. Next to the twenty-third Psalm in his Bible is an asterisk, and the word 'good'. For my father, and our family, this Psalm brought great comfort in the face of death, as it has for so many saints down through the centuries. It brought comfort because we knew that God was in control of every situation, even death. We have confidence that my father is in heaven in the presence of God, with all the saints, because Christ has defeated death; and that one day, we too will also be with him.

While I admire this young man’s faith, I do not share it. I am not sure I ever did,

even when I was a practicing Catholic. For RC's salvation was an option made available through faith, but not a guarantee. You had to earn it with a good life. But Mr. Pullen's comments do give us a glimpse into the power this particular Psalm has. It stands uniquely separated from the other 149 hymns in the book, a little like Spirit of Life stands out from our hymnal. And because of this special place, it deserves our attention.

Obviously I am not the first UU minister to tackle it. I am probably not even the thousandth as the alternate version in our meditation suggests. However, it is something we need attend to because it is so ubiquitous in our lives. But we also need to pay attention to it because its message reaches deep into the places where people live. In the end, the psalm is about finding comfort in times of desperation and despair...and who has not visited those wastelands?

The Jews have a long tradition called 'midrash'. Part of midrash is the development of tales that fill out the sparse and unwritten portions of the Scriptures. There are, for example, stories expanding on what the Bible offers about Adam and Eve, about Noah and all the other great figures.

There is a story about Psalm 23. First, this psalm is attributed to David in the time before he became king. David had become a hero after killing the Philistine Goliath and saving the land. Though he remained loyal to King Saul, Saul grew jealous of David's rising popularity. He saw David as a rival and a threat to power. Several times he sent him into battle expecting him to die. David wasn't very good at dying, it turns out. So Saul got more direct. David was forced to flee the king's assassins and headed into the wilderness. It was during this exile that David allegedly composed this Psalm. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

So what does the hymn say? Well, first, it establishes an orderly world for the faithful, with that orderliness coming from a place far greater than kingly power. "The Lord is my shepherd." This is the first linking of the divine and the idea of the shepherd, something that would be greatly expanded upon in John's Gospel where he anointed Jesus as the Good Shepherd. "He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake...Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

I was pondering those sections the other evening. Say the word 'shepherd' in a religious context, and I know I go a little dewy. The image that immediately comes to mind is the guy in the lambskin jerkin in the crèche scene...you know the young fella with the injured lamb draped around his neck and the admiring look for the baby Jesus on his face.

But the words of the psalm remind us that real shepherds are no Disney characters. "He leads me...for his name's sake." That sheep is owned and lives or dies at the whim of the shepherd. Any measure of protection accorded the sheep is the protection a man gives his property. "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Well, he can use those tools to keep the wolves at bay, but also to herd the sheep, often none too gently. And remember, sheep are not prized for their thoughtful abilities or kind natures, but for the wool they provide and the food they become. They aren't beloved pets.

But then as my wife Teilya suggested, some people thrive under clear rules and firm discipline. I don't think I do.

So as I read it, this psalm is at least partly about surrendering oneself to someone who owns you and hoping you'll be treated well, indeed, having faith that they will be treated well.

Well, this shepherd does that. "He leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul"... and this sheep finds the strength of the rod and staff comforting.

So we have a beautiful poem about an exhausted and disheartened being finding peace through surrender to a Higher Power. And that is wonderful. I certainly know that place, the place of powerlessness, that place of fear and deep anxiety, that place where I have wanted someone else to decide for me and solve my problems.

My colleague in Montreal, Rev. Diane Rollert has been there, too. In a sermon a year ago, she was reflecting on an idea appropriate to Remembrance Day:

No atheist in the foxhole? The thought got me going. Now there's something to think about as a Unitarian Universalist. No atheist in the trenches? No atheist on an airplane about to crash? For many years, flying would always bring out all my near-death fears. I'd look around at my fellow passengers and wonder if I should get to know them just in case we found ourselves on the brink of death. I'd grip the arms of my seat so tightly during take-off and landing that my knuckles would turn white.

Years ago, on a particularly bumpy flight, (you know, one of those flights when the plane keeps dropping thousands of feet unexpectedly) I found myself sitting next to a crying child. I could barely keep myself from shaking apart. So, I began to sing the one prayer I knew: Spirit of Life come unto me. Spirit of Life, the hymn I'd been singing with Unitarian Universalist congregations for years. Magically, we both calmed. I imagined the Spirit of Life, the Divine Mystery, present with us, and the spirit of my whole religious community singing in unison, holding us close as we bumped through the skies.

After that flight, I decided that I needed more prayers in my arsenal.

Diane considered the 23rd Psalm, but it was problematic for her, as it is for many Unitarians. Some are troubled by the male God image. Others are uncomfortable with the implied submission and still others with the notion of a deity who watches our every move and who can and does intervene in our daily lives.

For Diane, the answer came in the song we just heard in the meditation: Bobbie McFerrin's haunting choral arrangement of the 23rd Psalm had touched me deeply the first time I heard it. So I memorized it—not as it was translated in the King James Bible, but in the New Revised Standard Version, with McFerrin's revision, substituting She for He.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
She makes me lay down in green pastures;
she leads me beside still waters;

she restores my soul...

For me, the word She was a gateway—somehow it opened the psalm's power

for me. How do I explain it? It is absolutely true that I was unsure as any Unitarian Universalist seeker about my own theology, that I did not start praying to God until I found myself in a foxhole, on a flight. I was one big chicken, sure that I was about to die— no matter what anyone may have told me about the statistical unlikelihood. And I prayed really, really hard. I found that I wasn't praying to be saved in the event of a disaster. I was praying in gratitude for the life I had lived thus far, for all the small, beautiful moments. I was praying that all those I loved would be blessed. I was praying that the world would be blessed.

Perhaps the stumbling block for many of us is this idea of prayer. There is an old joke that says Christians pray to God and Unitarians pray To Whom It May Concern. Many of us, if we pray, don't know to whom we pray...or if we do, we know that we don't pray to the harsh God of the Hebrew Bible. Some of us get so fussed about the idea of the old harsh and judging Biblical God that the very word 'prayer' makes us uncomfortable. I have spoken in some UU congregations where the very use of the words 'God' and 'prayer' in a positive way would earn me a stern rebuke at coffee hour... if they waited that long.

But here's the thing. I believe the act of praying is intrinsic to human nature, and that organized religion has co-opted that intrinsic quality and turned it into a marketing tool for their preferred deity. That they have twisted it to ends with which some of us do not agree does not mean we should toss the whole idea of prayer. After all, prayers don't kill people, people kill people.

I have a confession: sometimes I pray. There, I've said it. Yup, sometimes I pray...often by accident. Last week my daughter Elora wandered off around the neighbourhood after dark. It was a case of miscommunication between parents. We found her quite quickly, a little upset but none the worse for wear. I know I prayed when I went out to find her. I don't know what words formed in my head, or if I spoke them aloud, or to whom they were addressed, but I expect I asked for the chance to find her fast and safe.

The great American preacher Howard Thurman once described prayer as an inward journey across an interior sea to an island. In the center of the island stands a temple and inside the temple burns a flame. That's where prayers go. That idea has always moved me. If my prayers go anywhere, they go into me and towards whatever spark of the divine lies within. My prayers call on my inner reserves and whatever capacity I have to summon the peace and confidence that calms my fears in times of stress and anxiety.

Is there a little outside help? Maybe, I don't know. I don't think so, but that's just me. Perhaps it doesn't really matter. What matters is the "Voice still and small...calming my fears, quenching my tears." After the event I also find the gratitude. The gratitude needs to be expressed by me...it doesn't have to be heard by anyone else.

I won't go so far as to say that everyone needs a prayer in their arsenal as Diane said of herself. But I will say that most of us are better off and more secure when we can find some words, some ideas, some shared feelings that calm us, settle us down and inspire us to go on with life.

Perhaps that's why so many people have tried to rewrite the 23rd Psalm. They recognize its power for others and want some of that for themselves.

I close with another version...

The Religious Humanists 23rd Psalm

Life itself is my guide. I shall not be denied its sustaining power.
The green earth provides me with lavish nourishment.
The cool still pools of water refresh my spirit.
A deep intuition leads me along a path that is true for the sake of existence itself.

Even though I walk through a valley where the dark shadows prevent me from knowing where life finally leads in death, ultimately I will not fear for the energy of the universe is within me.

The tools by which I am kept from wandering off into despair, they are a comfort to me. Even in the face of threats to my well being and my very life, the Spirit of Life nourishes me, honours me by its presence and reminds me that I really have more than I need. Surely goodness and kindness radiate upon me constantly and I shall dwell within this universe with its transforming processes forever.