

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

Are you blessed with the skill of memorization? Is that one of the handy tools in your toolbox? Well, not me! I can look at something on a slip of paper, study it hard, and then look away and not remember a thing. And that's peculiar, since I have such a great memory. I can remember events from the past with certainty, even while others who were there get it all distorted. Just ask me! But memorizing? No, just too hard. When I was in seminary for example, a group of us decided to do a skit about Noah and God, and, since I was older and greyer, and we were being stereo=typical, I was chosen to play God. I was to begin the play, speaking with authority from the pulpit in chapel, and that was fine; I could read the script from there, like I do each Sunday morning here with you. It was a very tall pulpit, with a lot of steps, and with a kind of umbrella-shaped roof in which there was a light for reading. I discovered during rehearsal that I could flip the light switch on and off to simulate lightening at the beginning of the Noah story. I also could read my script well from there, and I was a big hit. But then my character was to climb down from the heavens and speak directly and personally with the student playing Noah, and leaving the printed script behind, I was hopeless. I couldn't remember a thing. So much for my liturgical acting career.

Like most of us in my generation, memorization was an important part of the educational process. I remember struggling abnormally with multiplication tables, German verb participles, the notes on music staves, but one of the worst was memorizing the 23rd Psalm, or trying to, in the 4th grade. In those days, our suburban church Sunday school, brimming with kids, was divided-up by grade and gender. And so, there were about 20 boys around my age in a class with two really strict male teachers. They were, as most of our parents, WWII vets and they didn't abide any fooling around: we had a curriculum to accomplish and there would be no distraction. I think that was why the girls had their own class in the basement room next door. And, one Sunday morning to my horror, we were told we were to memorize this old-fashioned Psalm which it was clear that every Christian child must know by heart. We had homework. And, I took it seriously. The last thing I wanted was to be humiliated in front of my peers. Or in front of God and his Sunday school teachers. During the next few weeks, we were called upon individually to stand and recite the famous psalm, and to be perfectly honest, I never really got it right. To this day, I have a vaguely uncomfortable relationship with the 23rd Psalm; I remember the difficulty with which it was force-fed to me, and am embarrassed that I can't recite it reliably without the text in front of me.

Which is too bad, really, since it certainly is a psalm about comfort and reassurance, about trust and thanksgiving, and ought to bring a feeling of warmth rather than apprehension. So, we say it, together or responsively, usually twice a year in church, but can you tell me where else we often hear it? (funerals). That's probably because of that famous image in the fourth verse about the valley of the shadow of death. Just yesterday I attended a graveside service at which the Psalm was recited by some who had it better memorized than I, and it wouldn't have been a real funeral without the 23rd Psalm. But there's a lot more in the text than just the fear of death. The old song begins with the proclamation that the Lord is my shepherd, and so I want for nothing that's really important. The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures, which are rare in the Palestinian region, so I can have the food I need. And the Lord leads me beside the still waters where I can drink from the elusive oasis in that dry and rocky region. And then, one day, Jesus says to his followers that he is the Good Shepherd. Wait, what?! For hundreds of years, we Israelites have been singing that psalm, even memorizing it, to thank our Lord

God...and now Jesus is saying that he is the shepherd? Give us a moment to process that...is Jesus saying that *he* is God? Or maybe the Son of God? Interesting. He did say it, right? *I am* the Good Shepherd. Boy, that puts a new twist on everything, doesn't it?!

If you did memorize this Psalm as a child, it probably was in the words of the King James's version, which uses Elizabethan language, with lots of thous and thys and such, unlike the prayer-book version we said together this morning. It is said that the King James translators deliberately choose a more antique form of English to give the text a bit more dignity, but by doing so back in 1611, they gave us a subtle gift. After the initial proclamations in the first three verses of the psalm, the psalmist stops talking *about* God (or Jesus), and turns instead to talk *with* God. And says 'for thou art with me'. That might sound a bit more formal and respectable than what we said today 'for you are with me', but in fact it's just the opposite. In earlier English, 'thou' is the more intimate word; 'you' was the more formal. Today, we use the word 'you' for all our second-person speech, but in earlier times, we would call each of our closest friends and family 'thou', and use the adjectives 'thy' and 'thine' for those with whom we were most familiar. And the translators 400 years ago brought that sense along from the biblical Hebrew and Greek of the ancient texts. So, when we speak to God (Jesus) in this psalm, we are having a heart-to heart with our closest friend, with our most beloved family member, and it reveals the kind of relationship we sheep have with our Savior, our Shepherd, the one who leads us to better places. And who protects us from the dark shadows and the vicious predators. And Jesus reveals that, all along, he has been that divine Shepherd.

And then, as we switch metaphors in verse 5, God is revealed as generous host, one who sets a place of honor at the table for each of us, a place where our enemies, even though they might wish us harm, will just have to endure our presence and our special status. For we are ones who can call God by the pronoun 'thou'. We're that close, we're that connected. God shows his endorsement of us and our ministry by anointing us, and then pours his sustaining Holy Spirit into the cups of our lives until they overflow beyond our wildest expectations. Are we to understand that Jesus is revealing himself, not only as the Shepherd, but also as the Host? Is it he who divinely invites us to his table? In our Eucharistic act of praise and thanksgiving, we hope to receive the sustenance of God's love. Our enemies, and all those who wish us harm, cannot interfere with God's grace in the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That grace is ours for the asking, as we seek and knock as intimate friends and family of the Most High.

This morning we sang a hymn which paraphrases the text of Psalm 23, and it's one of my favorites. It was written by Isaac Watts, an eighteenth century poet whose work is represented by no fewer than 17 hymns in our hymnal. Perhaps his best-known text is 'Joy to the world, the Lord is come'. In the last verse of today's song, he describes what it must be like when God's mercy shall follow us all the days of our life, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever...the conclusion of the psalm. There, he says, would we find a settled rest, while others go and come; no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home. An ideal, divine type of home. Sadly, not every child has the blessing of such a home to be sheltered in, and we hear of so many tragic situations where abuse and neglect are the more usual fare. And that's why, I think, this psalm, despite its popularity at funerals, is more about life than death. The provisions and security it describes, by Good Shepherd and generous host, are more about the way life should be lived than about our hope and expectations in the afterlife. The model of the Shepherd and the Host probably need not be memorized, but certainly ought to be learned by heart, and taken to heart, that all may find a settled rest each day as children in God's loving home. Amen