

Counting Sheep



The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....

The 23rd Psalm

When I was about 10 years old, I started having trouble going to sleep. As the sleepless nights went on, I learned that I shouldn't wake up my mother or father – but it was always OK to go to my grandmother.

Granny would take me by the hand and lead me down the stairs to the kitchen, where she would heat up milk (her favorite medicine for sleeplessness) and then read me stories.

There were just two books Granny would read from – the first was a pictorial history of Scottish heroes (her ancestors), and the second was an illustrated Bible. The Scottish heroes in my grandmother's book were dashing and brave. The great hero of Granny's Bible was King David, who was a shepherd, and – according to Granny – sang to his sheep.

King David, Granny said, wrote the 23rd psalm for his sheep and for us. So with her help I began to memorize the psalm – and learn the story it tells. Because on those nights long ago, Granny was teaching me a deeper story, a story I learned by heart: *There is a Love that will not let you go.*

Andy's Confirmation

Years later, when our son Andy was 13, he was preparing for Confirmation. The Rector had told the class to memorize the 23rd psalm –and he also told them they would have to pass a test on it before they could be confirmed. Now Andy had a learning disability and also found it almost impossible to focus on anything for longer than a minute. He began to panic about his inability to learn the psalm (he came home with the King James Version), and so I searched for a simpler translation that he could learn.

And Andy did learn it! Unfortunately, according to the Rector, he had learned the 'wrong' psalm, and Andy failed the test. (The Rector actually posted the scores on the parish bulletin board, and there was Andy's failing score, at the very bottom of the list.)

So he went back to work until he finally learned the 'real' psalm, and he was able to be confirmed when the Bishop came. But the deeper story that Andy learned from all this was that God is the One who judges us, and always finds us wanting.

This was the picture of God that Andy carried for most of the rest of his life.

Learning the story by heart

Of course it's important to memorize some poems, some songs, some verses of Scripture as we grow up. I think of the first Christians, most of whom couldn't read, but who all learned the 23rd psalm. Those early Christians painted frescos of Jesus on the walls of the Roman Catacombs; they pictured him as the Good Shepherd, carrying a lamb in his arms, the image of the Love that will not let you go.

And I also think of a man who taken hostage by terrorists in Beirut, and then captive for over a year. When he was finally released, reporters asked him, "How did you survive?" He told them that he remembered and prayed the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd psalm – memorized in childhood. Those verses, those prayers, helped him pray through the darkest hours.

The Good Shepherd

When Andy died two years ago, I had great trouble sleeping again. So one night, lying in the darkness and not wanting to wake up my husband, I began to practice 'counting sheep'. But I was not picturing sheep, jumping one by one over a fence, but trying to remember the 23rd psalm, verse by verse.

Each verse of this psalm is worthy of a sermon – or much more important, a night's contemplation.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...

With this first verse I remembered when we lived in the Middle East, when Andy was a very little boy – and I remembered the huge flocks of sheep crossing the roads, even in downtown Beirut. (Did you know that the shepherd walks in the middle of his flock, keeping them together and guiding them – slowly, very slowly! – on their way?)

He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters...

When I got to this verse, in the dark of that first night, I couldn't remember which line comes first – is it the green pastures or is it the still waters? Does it really matter? Both the green pastures and the still waters are found in that peaceful place where God waits for us.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me...

The other night I was with a small group at St. Paul's church, reading the 23rd psalm together. A man in the group began to remember his childhood fear of the dark. As a little boy this man (now in his 80s with a deep voice and one of the patriarchs of the parish) was so afraid of the dark he could not go to sleep. So one day his father took him out into the woods near their house. Together, hand in hand, they walked under the dark trees, day by day, until the little boy was able to let go of his father's hand and explore a little bit.... and until he was finally able to go to sleep in his own bed.



This is the One who holds our hand and will not let us go.

The 23rd psalm as a prayer

Try this prayer when you can't get to sleep.... Try these verses when you can't get the judgmental God out of your mind.... Try this psalm whenever you need to remember that our God is the Love that will not let us go:

**You, LORD, are my shepherd;
I shall not be in want.**

**You make me lie down in green pastures,
You lead me beside still waters.**

**You revive my soul,
and guide me along right pathways
for Your Name's sake.**

**Though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**

**You spread a table before me
in the presence of those who trouble me;
You have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.**

**Surely Your goodness and mercy
shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in Your house for ever.**

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