

## “Thou Preparest a Table”

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Based upon Psalm 23; 1 Kings 19:1-8

For the past couple of weeks, we have been exploring texts which illustrate and celebrate how God breathes life into our world. The risen Christ breathed new life into the disciples following the Resurrection, enabling them to move from being locked down and scared to being bold evangelists in the world. Last Sunday, in *Psalm* 104, God the Creator breathed life into all the animals, birds, and sea creatures as well as human beings. Today the Lectionary continues to track the breath of God by offering us the most famous and probably most beloved of all of the psalms. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” *Psalm* 23 famously begins. “He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul...” You may not see or hear the breath in this psalm, but it is hidden in that last word “soul,” which is *nephesh* in the Hebrew. *Nephesh* is usually translated “soul,” or sometimes “whole self” because the Jewish idea of soul encompasses body, mind, and spirit. But the literal meaning of *nephesh* is “that part that is given breath.” So, that last verse I read could be translated faithfully: “He returns to me my ability to breathe and live.” I like that because this psalm has enabled people to breathe for centuries through countless moments that made them hyperventilate. When we feel overwrought, when we are grieving, it is so comforting to imagine God as a good shepherd leading us back to a place of safety where we can breathe again. That’s why in Christian circles, this psalm is most often read at hospital bedsides or in funerals and memorial services.

I am deeply grateful for that and have always loved this psalm. But this week, perhaps because of everything that is going on, what stood out to me was not the comfort of the first few verses, but the unwelcome images which follow them: valleys so dark that they feel like death, and tables set in the presence of enemies. Did you notice that the psalmist did not say, “*if* I walk through a valley of deep darkness,” (or “the valley of the shadow of death” as the King James version puts it)? The psalmist said “when,” as if to suggest that even with a good shepherd leading us, we can’t avoid having to go through dark valleys that scare us almost to death. Then in the next line, when the imagery shifts from the fields to a dining room, the threats get even worse: “You prepare before me a table *in the presence of my enemies.*” The psalm doesn’t say that God prepares a table “away from” our enemies, or “after conquering” our enemies. What are enemies doing in the most comforting psalm known to humankind, and why did God invite them to dinner?

After spending the week doing some theological and exegetical digging around, I discovered that this verse in particular has been considered problematic by lots of people over the years. Although many consider this psalm beloved, C.S. Lewis was not among them. He thought *Psalm* 23 was “petty and vulgar” because of this table verse, which he interpreted to be God offering a meal to the psalmist as a gesture of both vindication and mockery.<sup>1</sup> In other words, “Nana, nana, na, na enemies! God loves me but not you!” Other Christians have interpreted this verse with variations on that same theme. Some have imagined the text was

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, C.S., *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1958), 21.

written by David after defeating either Saul or enemy nations with God's help. "I win, you lose," they thought the table proclaimed. Others interpret this meal spiritually and see the psalmist at the table proclaiming, "I believed in the right God, and you believed in the wrong one. No heavenly banquet for you!" I never read such vindictiveness or religious triumphalism into the text myself, but many others have.

Personally, I always thought this was a passage about reconciliation. The psalmist is on one side of the table and those who had been enemies were on the other, and God was making peace between them. We know through Christ that God is in the business of reconciliation and calls us to be too. We are supposed to love our enemies as ourselves. But it turns out that's not what this line is about either. The Hebrew word translated "in the presence of" really speaks more of opposition than invitation. The enemies are not at the table on a social call or peace-making mission, which leaves us again with the unanswered question, "Why are they there?" If this isn't about petty vindictiveness, which doesn't seem particularly Godlike, and it's not about reconciliation, then what is the psalmist trying to convey?

Keeping in mind that Jesus was a Jew, I turned to Jewish sources, and think I found our answer. Rabbinic scholars understand this text to be a reference back to the Exodus, and how God protected the Hebrew slaves from the Egyptian armies at the Red Sea, and then provided for them food in the wilderness. Keeping this and certain translation discoveries in mind, I believe that this verse affirms two truths. The first truth is that in life, there are always things or people that threaten us. The second truth is that with God in our lives, there will always be a table too. I want us to consider these truths in greater depth today.

The word for enemies in *Psalms* 23:5, *tsarar* in Hebrew, comes from a verb meaning "cramped up" or "pressed in." In other words, it isn't a term to describe people of other religions, nor is it one that specifically or exclusively refers to the people who threatened either the Hebrew slaves or David. The term describes all those things that make us feel confined or trapped. Isn't that what the virus is doing to us now? It has pressed in upon us and confined us to our homes. It has taken away many people's livelihoods, and pretty much everyone's sense of security. So, there is one enemy we can add to our list. But any number of things can make us feel threatened or trapped this way. One commentator I read considered all the enemies within, not just those external sources of concern. "What if the enemy is my own pride?" he asked. "What if it is my own fear? What if it is apathy?"<sup>2</sup> One could easily add, "What if it's my addictive personality? What if it's my perfectionism? What if it is my insecurities?" These aspects of ourselves can press in upon us, influencing our decisions and world view.

If we are thinking about external enemies that make us feel confined or threatened, the list is long. Rabbi Harold Kushner, of *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People* fame, added still more to that potential list by suggesting that maybe the enemies are people we seek nourishment from who end up disappointing us.<sup>3</sup> In other words they are friends and family

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<sup>2</sup> See "A Table for one," FatPastor Blog, Feb. 2, 2014, retrieved April 28, 2020 from <https://fatpastor.me/2014/02/22/a-table-for-one>.

<sup>3</sup> Kushner, Harold S., *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-third Psalm* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 132-34.

members, neighbors, or political leaders, people we thought were on our side or who we believed were supposed to be, but who let us down. Other rabbis think of enemy more in economic terms. They say one of the reasons in Jewish tradition *Psalm 23* is typically read on the Sabbath (as opposed to at funerals) is that every time the Jews stopped working to keep the Sabbath, while the rest of the world kept on working, they were worried about their livelihoods and whether they would have the resources to survive.<sup>4</sup> That certainly hits home these days. Then of course there are the kinds of “enemies” out there who fit the more classical definition of someone who is opposed to us and wants to hurt us. The point is that whether the forces that press in on us come from our own minds, our families, our bank balances, society, or nature itself, we all have them. You can’t get through life without facing something that opposes or tries to confine, any more than you can get through life without going through a dark valley or two. That is the nature of life, whether we like it or not.

Jesus called on us to conquer our enemies with love, but that’s the subject of another sermon. In today’s text, the psalmist isn’t interested so much in how we respond to them as how God does. When the enemy closes in, God responds by putting a table between us and them, not so that we can chant, “Nana, nana, na, na!” condescendingly, but so that we have what we need to withstand the onslaught. God intervenes, in other words, like a shepherd, by providing for our needs.

The story about the prophet Elijah from *1 Kings* today illustrates this well. Elijah was one of the greatest prophets of all time. We pick up the story of his life today right after he had defeated 450 prophets of the pagan god Baal in a contest with God’s help. Elijah was able to summon God to light a sacrifice that had been soaked with water when the prophets of Baal could not. But in so doing, he made King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who worshiped Baal, look like fools. So, instead of congratulating him on his triumph, they promised to kill him. This sent Elijah fleeing in terror into the wilderness afraid for his life and exhausted by the demands of his prophetic ministry.

You might remember how this story ends. Elijah makes it to a cave where God speaks to him in “a still, small voice.” But the middle of the story, which we often skip over, is just as important as the cave conversation. Elijah falls down exhausted and overwhelmed in the desert after running all day, and an angel wakes him up. “Get up and eat,” the angel says, showing him that God has provided bread and fresh water. Elijah eats but then goes back to sleep. He’s still too overwhelmed to continue his journey. So, again the angel wakes him and feeds him. “Get up and eat,” the angel says, “otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” Elijah does this and is able to make it to the cave, where God gives him new instructions and hope.

“Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” This is what the table in *Psalm 23* proclaims. “You’re going through a hard stretch— first the dark valley, now the enemies on your heels. Eat, drink, know that I am still your provider, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” This is what the Communion table proclaims as well. Remember Luke’s

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<sup>4</sup> Kesselman, Shlomo Chaim, “*Psalm 23: L-rd Is My Shepherd*,” Chadbad.org, retrieved April 28, 2020 from [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/3832324/jewish/Psalm-23-L-rd-Is-My-Shepherd.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3832324/jewish/Psalm-23-L-rd-Is-My-Shepherd.htm)

Easter story? Two disciples were leaving Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus still defeated by the fact that Jesus had been crucified. They couldn't believe the good news of the Resurrection, nor could they share it. Then the risen Christ shows up on the road and walks with them for a while. They tell him all their crushed hopes and pressing fears, and he tells them why everything is going to be okay. They are somewhat comforted, but it isn't until Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them that "their eyes are opened" and they recognize him. That is why Jesus gave us this table. This meal was designed to help us get through the difficult journey of life by nourishing us in body, mind, and spirit. It reminds us that God is with us and that new life is always possible through God's grace. It reminds us not in a "nana, nana, na, na" way—because the table is open, and all are invited—but in a "wake up and eat" sense. God knew that we would need this meal, again and again and again, to remember, catch our breath, and move forward in faith.

"Oh great!" you may be thinking. "The virus has ruined the one thing that's supposed to sustain me. I can't even get to the table." I understand that feeling and know that eating in our own homes does not feel the same as eating together as a community does. But it's important not to get too focused on the actual table that we miss the message it proclaims. We know through the Resurrection that God is more powerful than a virus and that this table extends far beyond the walls of the physical building of the church. Whatever you have in front of you as your meal, whether it is bread and wine, or a donut and orange juice, God has the power to fill it with grace. God delivers, you see, wherever you might be. Your table can be a sacred table when you approach it that way seeking God's nourishment.

We don't know when we all will be able to feast at this particular table again together. But that does not mean that our Shepherd God is not with us. As you go about each day, look for the tables that God will provide. Some days it will be an actual table with actual food. Have you noticed how it feels like Christmas now when you can find a treat at the grocery store or in your delivery bags you haven't had for a while? Other days it will be a person or activity that feeds your heart or your spirit instead, enabling you to continue to move forward and not lose hope— a card, a phone call, a profound quotation, or an inspiring walk. We don't know how long this dark valley will last. But we do know that God is with us in it and will strengthen and nourish us along the way because that is the nature of the God we follow and serve.

One last word before we get to the feast. Although verse 5 says the enemies are pressing in all around and always will be, they aren't the ones who are chasing us in this poetic dream. The psalm ends on the comforting note with which it begins, by affirming that "surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in the house of our Lord forever." The verb in Hebrew is even more active than follow; it is "pursue." Ours is a God who stalks us with goodness and mercy and strengthens us with grace and love. Ours is a God who leads us through both pastures and pitch-black valleys. Trust and believe this good news and find rest and breath for your soul. Amen.