

Time for a pop quiz:

What piece of Scripture did we hear on the 4th Sunday of Easter, last week at the memorial service for Vivian Horvath, and again today?

The 23rd Psalm.

We know that is probably the most familiar of all psalms.

It's both genuinely beloved by many AND perhaps the only psalm some of us know.

It's striking that this one psalm would turn up in the Sunday liturgy twice within four months.

That would be *four* times in four months if we include last week's memorial service for Vivian, and that of another gentleman, William Bone, the week before.

You know, of course, even if it is your favorite psalm, even if it's the only psalm you know, that there are other psalms – other poems of praise and lamentation – in the Bible.

How many psalms, total, are there? [150]

Out of all that, the 23rd Psalm is in (disproportionately) heavy rotation.

It's safe to say that we'll hear it again during a memorial service (or three or four) at some point later this year. But after today I think we're done hearing it on Sundays until next Eastertide. So let's enjoy it while we have it.

Let's explore why it's such a magnetic message to so many.

Do you think it could be the opening line, "The Lord is my _____" ? [shepherd]

That is an evocative image, repeatedly reinforced throughout Scripture. We see it in today's other readings.

In the prophet Jeremiah (and this isn't the only time it appears in Jeremiah) "shepherd" is used not only to refer to one who tends sheep but a King, one who tends a nation.

It's used in this way in Israel and throughout the ancient Near East. We read here that the kings in Jeremiah's time are sorely lacking. The Lord says that because those shepherds have not attended to God's people, then God will attend to them *with evil* and raise up better kings to shepherd the flock.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is moved to compassion for the great crowd following him, for he sees that they are like "sheep without a shepherd". So Jesus teaches them "many things." How to recognize a good shepherd when you see one. How to shepherd one another as He shepherds us.

Jesus knew the 23rd Psalm -- and each of the other 149 -- deep in his bones. They're quoted and paraphrased throughout Mark and the other gospels. Isn't it amazing to think that whenever we say this or any psalm we're saying words that Jesus said too? And not only that: We're saying words that Jesus *lived*.

I think I understand why so many of us long to hear Psalm 23 at the end of life. We need the assurance of God as shepherd leading us through the valley of the shadow of death. We hang on to the promise that our loved one is safe at home in the house of the Lord, forever.

But that promise isn't just for the next life; it's for this one too. For the 23rd Psalm describes a journey. Literally. The psalmist is going somewhere and bids us to go there too. Not just lying down (or "lollygagging", as my mother would say) in green pastures, but venturing forth to those still waters. Then on to right pathways. Walking (not sitting) through that darkest valley, leaning on a staff, a rod, a walking stick, for support along the way. Going on to take one's place at a table of abundant hospitality. And then keep moving, keep moving, *keep moving*,

but not so fast or far that God's goodness and mercy can't keep up.

The center of all this movement? This life's journey? This *way of love*?

It's right in the middle, almost to the word, of the psalm.

There, halfway down, when the psalmist stops referring to God in the third person ("he") and

starts addressing God directly in the second person ("you").

You, Lord, are with me. You are with me, even now, all the way.

The psalmist stops talking about God and starts talking *to* God.

The psalmist goes from interest in God to intimacy *with* God.

From the head to the heart.

Not as an either/or but a both/and.

When we read this psalm, we read words that Jesus read.

When we read this psalm, we read words that Jesus walked, and walks with us today.

On page 5 of the bulletin, would you like to read it with me now?

The Lord is my shepherd;

I shall not be in want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures

and leads me besides still waters.

He revives my soul

and guides me along right pathways for his 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 will follow me all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

AMEN.