



**From the Pulpit: September 5, 2021**

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time / Labor Day Weekend

**The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

Psalm 23:6

*How to Love the World Again, VII: The Joy of Making*

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

herd, **he** maketh me to lie down in green pastures; **he** leadeth me beside still waters; **he** restoreth my soul.”

And then in verses 4–6, the poet stops talking **about** God and starts talking **to** God. He abruptly shifts from third- to second-person pronouns.

“the poet of Psalm 23 makes two important perspective shifts in his brief but dense poem.”

“**Thou** art with me; **Thy** rod and **thy** staff, they comfort me. **Thou** preparest a table before me. **Thou** anointest my head with oil.”

If David had submitted this poem to his professor at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, she might gently inquire why he makes this unannounced, unexplained, perspective shift, but he would explain, and she would understand and

I’m sure Katie and/or Christine pointed out to you in the sermons I missed while I was away, that the poet who wrote the most beloved passage in the history of literature—let’s say it was Shepherd Boy David—the poet of Psalm 23 makes two important perspective shifts in his brief but dense poem.

tell him it’s a very fine effort.

The first perspective shift occurs between verses 3 & 4 when the poet shifts from **third-** to **second-** person pronouns. In the first three verses of the poem the poet is talking **about** God. He’s talking **to** his readers, or his audience, or his congregation, but he’s talking **about** God.

Because when Shepherd-Boy David stops talking **about** God and starts talking **to** God, the poem gains new immediacy and intimacy and piety. It’s as if he can’t help himself. David is so enamored with the Shepherd God that it’s not enough to talk **about** God; he **must** talk **to** God.

“**The Lord** is my shepherd,” says Shepherd Boy David. And then all the third-person pronouns which refer back to “The Lord.” “**The Lord** is my shep-

So that’s the first perspective shift in this brief but packed poem: from third- to second-person pronouns. And the second perspective shift occurs between verses 4 & 5 when David stops talking about God the **Shepherd** and starts talking about God the **Host**.

He completely abandons—or maybe not; more on that in a minute—he completely abandons his outdoor, rural, agrarian setting, and shifts to an indoor, domestic setting of hearth and home.

“Thou preparest a table. Thou anointest my head; my cup overflows.” In other words, the table is set; the shower is free; the hairspray is out, the eye-shadow is ready for your pre-prandial ablutions. The 17-year-old cabernet is decanted and breathing.

Have you ever been through a dry season of the Spirit? Are you in the Valley of the Shadow? Does it feel like Death Valley—117°F, neither watering hole nor green blade for mile upon mile, just the jagged, flinty rock of the unforgiving wilderness? The deadline on your PhD. Dissertation is fast upon you, and you’ve gone to the well one too many times and there’s nothing left but sand and gravel and dust. Maybe you’re working 100 hours a week at your medical residency, and you are just depleted. Maybe your boss is unhappy with your numbers. You can’t find a job. You say, What the hell! I’m going home.

It’s late November and you walk up the front steps of your childhood home, and the Christmas candles are already in the windows, and you walk in the front door, and there’s a fire in the fireplace and the table is set with china and silver and crystal and candlesticks, and that table is groaning under the burden of its plenty, and your dad takes a glass and pours out the elixir of gladness into the chalice of mirth, and you’re home. Your cup overflows.

That’s the image David shifts to near the end of his poem. Once again, your professor at the workshop will ask why you abandoned your initial Shepherd metaphor for an apparently incompatible image, but you’ll explain, and she’ll understand, and she’ll say, “Nice submission.” The initial Shepherd metaphor is so vivid and so helpful and so fitting that it overpowers the Host Metaphor, but in the end, together, they work, right?

*“Have you ever  
been through a  
dry season of the  
Spirit? ...Does it feel  
like Death Valley,  
neither watering  
hole nor green  
blade for mile  
upon mile, just the  
jagged, flinty rock  
of the unforgiving  
wilderness? ...You  
say, What the hell!  
I’m going home.”*

This coming Saturday we will mark the 20th anniversary of the destruction of the World Trade Center. 2,606 people died at the Twin Towers that day. They all got a number, from 1 to 2,606. Do you remember who was Victim #0001? Not the first to die, but the first to receive a number. It was Father Mychal Judge, a Roman Catholic priest and Chaplain to the Fire Department of New York City.

Father Judge was a beloved member of the FDNY. He spent some of his time ushering fire fighters from this world to the next, giving last rites, visiting the families at the end. He was laid to rest days after 9/11, while they were still finding and counting and numbering the lost. His fine friend Michael Duffy, another Franciscan priest, gave the homily, and Father Duffy speculated about why Mychal Judge was Victim #0001.

Father Duffy says, “Mychal Judge’s goal in life was to get people ready to meet their Maker. In the coming

days and weeks, we’re going to discover the remains of over 300 New York City firefighters in the rubble, and in this life, he never could have ministered to them all.

So maybe Father Judge wanted to happen exactly what did happen. He passed through to the other side of life, and now he can continue doing what he wanted to do with all his heart. And now when all those firefighters come home to the house of the Lord, Mychal Judge is going to be on the other side of death to greet them. And he's going to greet them with that big Irish smile. He's going to take them by the arm and say, 'Welcome, I want to take you to my Father.'

"And so, today we come to bury Mike Judge's body but not his spirit. We come to bury his mind but not his dreams. We come to bury his voice but not his message. We come to bury his hands but not his good works."<sup>1</sup> 'Welcome,' said Father Judge, 'I want to take you to my Father.' I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

So there you have it: the two central metaphors of this brief but packed poem: Shepherd and Host. Guide and Grace. The agrarian and the domestic. The pasture and the hearth. And maybe the two central images are not quite as incompatible as it first appears. Look how the poem ends: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever."

A Scottish shepherd noticed that in this poem about the Loving and Loyal Shepherd, the picture is almost complete. The sheep are there, of course, and the green pastures, and the clean waters, and the shepherd's strong staff.

There's only one thing missing. Can you guess what it is? Do you know what every shepherd has that is missing from this song? Well, every Shepherd has a

sheepdog, right? You can't manage the sheep all by yourself—you need a herding dog to round up the sheep for you.

And so this Scottish shepherd says to himself, "The Psalm says, 'Surely Goodness and Mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.'" Goodness and Mercy must be the names of the Shepherd's dogs.

So this Scottish shepherd says: "The Lord is my shepherd, aye, and more than that, he has two fine collie dogs, and their names are Goodness and Mercy, and they follow me. With him before and them behind, even poor sinners like you and me can hope to get home at last."<sup>2</sup>

Home to the fold. Home to the hearth. The House of the Lord. Forever.

*"the two central metaphors of this brief but packed poem: Shepherd and Host. Guide and Grace. The agrarian and the domestic. The pasture and the hearth."*

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Duffy, Eulogy for Father Mychal Judge, Delivered at his funeral, September 15, 2001, St. Francis of Assisi Church, New York City.

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<sup>2</sup> William Taylor, *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1955), vol. 4, p. 130.

**—Prayers of the People—**  
**By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

Some days God, the world finds a hush: some semblances of silence that tunes our spirit to the divine. Some days there is an infinite noise: planes overhead, birds, too. The voices of those with whom we spend our lives. The noise of news, neighbors, intention, and introspection. None can drown out the everywhere of God. For, found equally within the muted day or chattering night is a blueprint of the sacred, a map to the one in whom we live and move and have our being. May we find that sacred center now.

We need you because some days we are worn through. We want to notice the tomatoes, ripe and ready, the grasshopper, poised, the spider, wrapping another meal, weaving another web.

We want to stand in gratitude, watching the wind in the grey clouds, the surging waves on the beach. Beauty all around us.

We want our bodies to pulse with the presence of your spirit. And sometimes we do.

But more often than not we worry: the high blood pressure and pulse of pain in our loved one's body preoccupies us. Our minds fill with the refugee, resettling, a vast Afghan diaspora leaving twenty year olds on the far side of a twenty year war, the only life they've known.

We want to spiral into the warm embrace of your love, but we are distracted by the levees, the warming ocean, the flood insurance, the heat wave, the families digging out after a muscular hurricane, equally expected and uninvited.

Let us live in both places—worry and the warmth of your love.

Let us hand over our burdens to you, knowing that the exhaustion of our worry will not prepare us to serve, will not energize us to help, will not move us. Carry us so that we might be hands and feet in the world. Call us to the work of love.

Where there is gnawing ache, let us love.  
Where there is numbing pain, let us love.  
Where there is burning hope, let us love.

Pacing is not enough. Doom scrolling is not enough. The cacophony of newsfeeds only agitates us.

Recalibrate our hearts and minds to the sound of love, so that we might be called up and out of lackluster response and into a modest, humble embodied walk with you.

God you are alive within the folds of this life: in our friendships and phone calls, in our families and text messages, in our workplace and schools.

Be with those who grieve today, as they greet the new rhythms of loss at work within and around them. Be with those who suffer chronic pain, throbbing, disruptive, breathtaking, constant. Be with those who are in transition: a new place, a new job, a new community, a new song, a new perspective.

Be, O God, within us. Let your love surge. Center us. And hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us...