



From the Pulpit: August 8, 2021
Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Psalm 23:3

How To Love The World Again, III: Returning

Psalm 23 by Robert Alter

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
In grass meadows He makes me lie down,
by quiet waters guides me.
My life he brings back.
He leads me on pathways
of justice
for his name's sake.
Though I walk in the vale of
death's shadow,
I fear no harm, for you are
with me.
Your rod and your staff—
it is they that console me.
You set out a table before me
in the face of my foes.
You moisten my head with oil,
my cup overflows.
Let but goodness and kindness pursue
me
all the days of my life.
And I shall dwell in the house of the
Lord
for many long days.

**“Growing Apples” by Nancy Miller
Gomez *How to Love the World, Poems of
Gratitude and Hope***

There is a big excitement in C block today.
On the window sill,
in a plastic ice cream cup
a little plant is growing.
This is all the men want to talk about:
how an apple seed germinated
in a crack of damp concrete;
how they tore open tea bags
to collect the leaves, leached them
in water, then laid the sprout onto the bed
made of Lipton. How this finger of spring
dug one delicate root down
into the dark fannings and now
two small sleeves of green
are pushing out from the emerging tip.
The men are tipsy with this miracle.

Each morning, one by one,
they go to the window and check
the progress of the struggling plant.
All through the day they return
to stand over the seedling
and whisper.

I've only been inside a prison once. Well to a correctional facility, for the afternoon. I was there with Emily Gunther, director of Grinnell College's Liberal Arts in Prison program. I rode in the back of professor (and former college president) George Drake's sedan. He knew the way because he lectured there every Tuesday. We parked. Began our way through security: present this ID, leave that belonging in that tray, bring this in, take this in the car. Dr. Drake lectured. History.

“Nancy Miller Gomez says, ‘Poetry helps me to make emotional sense of my life. Each poem is a struggle to clarify something I don't yet understand.’”

Afterward the men were generous in their attentiveness: who are you? a college chaplain. They asked questions I couldn't answer: will you be back again? They spoke with interest about their love for the class. Emily Gunther, now the director of the

program, was once one of the college students who started the program on a wing and a prayer, and whose work got the program accredited. Now you can earn up to 60 credits from Grinnell College from within the Newton Correctional Facility... halfway to a degree. They taught remotely all last year, not skipping a beat.

One man from the program said, “this has a blast radius that extends to our friends and family... you come out of this program wanting to help people.” Another said “You can't imagine what a pen is worth in prison.” Statistics suggest that no other program is as successful in mitigating re-incarceration after release.

So I was intrigued by Nancy Miller Gomez' poem *Growing Apples*. She was on C block for a similar reason: she teaches poetry at Salinas Valley State Prison as part of the Poetry in Jails program. "There is big excitement in C block today," those first 8 words speak volumes of hierarchy, of an ordered life, of the trauma of incarceration, being an anonymous number in an anonymous system. And yet there in the midst of it all, life emerges from the fragments of a dis/ordered chaos, an under-resourced accidental greenhouse becomes a place of miracle.

The miracle is not just the fact that an apple seed germinated. It is not just that the men noticed. It is not just that they stand over the seed, whispering life. It is not just that they tore open teabags, resourceful, a sign of hope. It is not just the struggling plant. It is not just the two small green leaves. It is not just Nancy Miller Gomez' rendition of the excitement on C block. It is not just James Crews scooping this poem up to place it among other poems that breathe hope and gratitude. It is not just that Christine Hides found the book of poetry tucked away in a bookshop on the other side of the country when she was visiting her daughter. (or the miracle of seeing family mid-pandemic) It is not just my reading it. Your hearing it. The whole scene, taken together, becomes miracle.

Nancy Miller Gomez says, "Poetry helps me to make emotional sense of my life. Each poem is a struggle to clarify something I don't yet understand." One of her students at the Blaine Street Women's Facility says, "Poetry class is the only place I have right now where I feel strong enough to write my way through all the tragedy and loss that haunts me every day... it is more than I could ever ask for or expect." And in the poem *Growing Apples*, Gomez traces it all: the sense of place in just eight words, the delight of an apple seed, the tender care, the hope, and...hidden too, in the middle-distance, the exact moments that led to the kindling of friendship that makes possible the nurturing of such a seed... the complicated painful story of how each man arrived there in the C block and even the wide open future of what they are doing now: writing poetry? Living changed? Or not? The apple seedling does not demand change, but offers an open possibility nonetheless.

I wonder too, what poetry has been like in these last 18 months at the prison, a pandemic within a pandemic, the disease, the affliction of mass incarceration, the plague of violence. A locking away, a silencing, a detaining of hope and gratitude. Or not? Nancy Miller Gomez says "she entered Salinas Valley State Prison with a backpack of poems and a fear of being caught in a lockdown...but what she discovered was compassion and human connection."

"You carry within
you a reason why.
A reason why you
seek the renewal,
restoration, and
strength of our
Shepherd-God."

Poetry ushers us into other worlds, into universes so beyond our experience of life they *should* be inaccessible, unreachable, and yet the poet conjures a reality so vivid that we are there in a heartbeat, summoned, awakened. Nancy Miller Gomez conjures C block as foreign to me as some centuries-old shepherd's field. I know those realities only tangentially, peripherally, from books, films, news articles from that one afternoon at the Newton Correctional Facility a dozen years ago for a handful of minutes. I can no more understand the reality of C block than I can the green pastures of Psalm 23, yet the poet opens the door, and invites us in.

Psalm 23 is a poem that opens a door to an ancient world, *and* opens a door to the sacred, thus opening a door to ourselves, and the world anew. Verse one offers an ancient thesis statement about the divine, "The Lord is my Shepherd." Verse two sets the scene, "lay down in green pastures, lead me beside still waters." And verse three gives us a "why," "restore my soul."

Who? Where? Why? Shepherd, sustenance, soul.

That is a "why" statement I can get behind. Why? To revive my soul. There are a thousand reasons why we'd seek renewal, restoration, resurrection, revival. Whatever it is in your life, some new grief, some old pain, some surprising news, some lingering trauma, some long held fear, some unrealized hope, some triggered anxiety, some chronic heartbreak, some aching distress. You know what it is for you. You carry within you a reason why. A reason why you seek the renewal, restoration, and strength of our Shepherd-God.

The many translations of Psalm 23 from Hebrew to English give us another window into what the poet is trying to tell us. The New International Version says God “refreshes my soul.” The Good News Bible says God “gives me strength.” The Christian Standard Version says God “renews my life.” And of course we have the familiar echo of the 16th century King James Version written on our heart: God “restoreth my soul.” And we need them all: the refresh, the renewal, the restoration, the strength.

No wonder selling Bibles is half-a-billion dollar industry in the United States each year. In order to make our way in this mother tongue of ours, some scholar must carry one of a seemingly infinite number of translations to our doorstep, so that we might enter into the ancient poems we hold dear. Bible after Bible, we line our shelves with new attempts at faithfulness.

Robert Alter’s 2007 translation has been within arms length from me all summer. Open. Alive on my desk. I’ve been using it for my daily devotional, and am enamored by the poetic depth of his translation, as well as his insights into what we miss when we read the Bible in a language other than the original. He is a scholar of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkley, and has been there since 1967. In those early years, he wrote scholarly articles, and found that none of the English translations quite got to the heart of what he was noticing in the Hebrew itself, and so he started making his own translations to reference in his published articles. Those little bits and pieces of translation—a few verses here, a few more there—soon grew, and he ended up translating most if not all of the Hebrew Bible, including the Psalms (he didn’t set out to undertake translating all of Leviticus for example, but sometimes we slog through things we didn’t intend, for reasons we don’t quite understand).¹

He renders Psalm 23:3 “My life he brings back.” His translation evokes a truly life-or-death moment from which God has made sure-rescue. I picture someone on the brink of death, someone who would surely have faded fast, someone whose DNR is taped to the door, someone who has already called in the priests for last rites.

¹ New York Times. Sunday Magazine. Avi Steinberg “The Revelations of Robert Alter.” Dec. 23, 2018, Page 43.

This is the 18 year old in my former youth group who was training to become a pilot, when his plane’s engine failed, and he had to perform an emergency landing on a less-than-rural highway. This is the friend whose car started to hydro-plane on the highway but was flung into the grassy ditch instead of the nearby winter riverbank. This is the hard labor of childbirth that in another era would have ended quiet differently. This is the near-miracle of your survivorship. This is the COVID patient who was pulled back from death’s door.

“some of the earliest theological debates in the early church had to do with exactly what it means to be an embodied enfleshed human being”

Maybe it’s been a long time, or it just happened, but each of us have had a Psalm 23 moment (or moments) “my life he brings back.” If not you, then your loved one. “My life he brings back.”

Robert Alter chooses those words carefully. He is especially attuned to the word that is often translated “soul.” “He restoreth my soul,” says the King James Version. Robert Alter here chooses the word “life” He points out the word “*nephesh*” has such a laundry list of meanings, it’s not universally true to translate as “soul.”

Nephesh might mean breath or living being. So “my life he brings back” might be like the feeling when you get the wind knocked out of you, or when your

airway is blocked, or a knee is on your neck, or you can’t breathe, and then breath and life come rushing back in. Adjacent to that, it might mean neck or throat, because your neck and throat are the way you breathe. And so Psalm 69 in the King James Version says “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my soul.” But Robert Alter says a better translation is “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.” Not unrelated, it also might have to do with a variety of hungers: appetite, desire, emotion, passion. The very desire to breathe, live, fill your lungs with air, gets turned into longing, emotion, passion.²

Hebrew translation is not linear, one equals one. It has room. Breathing space. To evoke something wider than we might have expected.

² Brown, Francis, 1849-1916. The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon : with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic : Coded with the Numbering System from Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. Peabody, Mass. :Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.

—Prayers of the People— By The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Also Robert Alter points out, the Hebrew worldview has a different view on what we might call “the soul.” In Hebrew, there is not a way for body and soul to be separated. You cannot “have” a body, you “are” a body. Your body is not separate from your being. Who you are is always embodied. We get the ideas of immortality of the soul from the Greek influences on our theology, and some of the earliest theological debates in the early church had to do with exactly what it means to be an embodied enfleshed human being, and where God’s presence is within the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even the very origin stories of our faith point to an embodiment, the name Adam comes from the Hebrew word *Adamah*, which means soil, earth, dirt, into which God breathes the breath of life. Who we are is wrapped up in dirt and breath, flesh and inhalation, touch, taste, smell, tied to the very core of who we are.

Our most ancient Christian texts, like Tertullian and Irenaeus, talk of that “tender, earthy flesh” and the God who “embraced tenderness and vulnerability” in the person of Jesus Christ.³ They bring us back to the God of the manger in order to open us up to the Shepherd-God of Psalm 23, minding the flock (us) in the field.

The refreshment of my soul is not some metaphysical, metaphorical refresh, but that body-deep flesh-bound restoration that comes when our embodied existence senses the nudge and necessity of the presence of God. As people of faith, we turn to poetry to give us a window into an embodied life, an embodied moment. It does not spirit us away from the pain of this life, to some spiritual oasis, but detects the muscles and flesh tied to the breath of life. What makes poetry ineffable is its attentiveness to the flesh-y-ness of the human experience. What makes sacred poetry so divine is its incarnational hue.

May God meet you in the vulnerability of need today. May God meet you with restoration, the inhale and exhale of breath, the strength and renewal that is only possible at the threshold of the presence of God. Amen.

³ Maya Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015) 43.

God of green pastures, Creator of abundant life,

On this Sabbath day we are grateful for your gift of rest, a respite from our daily journeys, for sacred music to lift our hearts, and for poetry and scripture to nourish our souls. We remember silently the people and situations you have placed in our hearts and minds this morning.

Hear both our concerns and our gratitude for answered prayers: the new family member, the wedding, the relationship, repaired, and the late summer opportunities to notice abundant life in the wildflowers and locusts, and in the butterflies and hydrangeas.

Restore us, O God. Restore our communities, restore your world and creation. We pray especially for those facing mental and physical illness. Relieve their pain and make a way through. Give strength to their caretakers who drive to the ER, sit by the bedside, and tend to medical appointments.

You are our companion O God, as daily we travel between home and work and church, prepare for a new school year and activities, as we run errands and rest. We ask for your guidance for those leaders of our community and nation facing important decisions. Always and everywhere, may we seek to follow the path you have set before us. When we are distracted or off course, when our attention is stolen by electronic devices, redirect us, O God.

And, renew us O, God, When the stories of fires and floods, war and violence, hunger and variants overwhelm our individual and collective compassion, when the lines that divide us become so normalized that we look past them, when we have lost faith in our ability to find the common good, renew Us, O God.

We bring these spoken and unspoken prayers to you, Holy One. You are our hope and so with confidence in your grace and mercy, we pray the prayer Jesus Christ teaches us to pray....