

On not wanting (Psalm 23)

"I shall not want" has more than one meaning.

by [Liz Goodman](#)

March 20, 2020

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

I live in a rural area, and there my husband and I have raised our two sons. When we first moved here, just starting out in life, we decided not to have cable TV, saving us at least one bill per month. (This was before streaming.) We fell out of the habit of having cable, relying on DVDs from Blockbuster and then Red Box and often the library for our entertainment.

We never got back into the habit. So our two boys have grown up in a world relatively free of advertising. There aren't many billboards around. There are no buses driving by, riddled with ads. So, even now, 15 years hence, when we're at their grandparents' or at a hotel and TV is an option, they're shocked at how annoying ads are, at how it is that people put up with this.

Another unintended consequence is that they've never had ads stoke their desire for things, things they otherwise wouldn't know about and therefore wouldn't want. Given that we have to go to some effort to shop at a big box store, an effort I'm rarely willing to put forth (I'm really lazy), these two kids have been sometimes surprisingly unaware of the larger economy.

I remember once when my older son, Tobias, was maybe eight. We were at Target, in the toy aisle, which had Tobias mesmerized. He'd had *no idea* all this existed. Nerf

guns (several of which he already owned, but they came from the smaller toy department at our grocery store), PlayMobil, Matchbox cars, Dora and Pretty Ponies and Power Rangers. After a moment of taking it all in, he turned to me and asked to leave. He was clearly uncomfortable about how all this made him feel, what all this stoked in him.

The line in the 23rd Psalm that speaks of liberation from this otherwise near-constant stoking of desire is “I shall not want.” I’d long heard this line as speaking of being free of deprivation—free of hunger, free of homelessness. This pastoral psalm that imagines the comfort and assurance of being in the Lord’s presence and care of course imagines one aspect of that as having your every need provided for.

But I suspect it could also be about being free of the condition of wanting, of wanting stuff—which is all the more a suffering state when it’s in no regard to what that actual stuff might be. You just *want* it.

This state is clearly stoked by our unceasing consumer economy. It’s also something that seems innate for some people. I know I presume I’m being shortchanged more than many do. I see in the other of my sons, the younger one, a presumption that he’s getting the short end of the stick even when’s he not. In each of us (both younger siblings), it’s something of a torment, this wanting—and I wish him free of it, and me.

The assurance “I shall not want”: it harks back to the 10th commandment, that we’re not to want our neighbor’s house, or our neighbor’s wife, or his slave or donkey or anything our neighbor has. There’s a runaway covetousness written into this runaway commandment. Really, that we’re not to *want*, that we’re not to operate from a state of want: it’s a word translated in the Ten Commandments as “covet,” but it’s actually the same word for want.

It shows up also in the life of Jacob, especially as it regards Esau—Jacob’s name indicates his natural state of “grabbing at the heel.” As for him and perhaps for all: to live a state of wanting warps loving relationships and forecloses on gratitude and contentment.

That the Lord is my shepherd, then, and by this I shall not want, I shall not suffer in the state of discontented wanting and my relationships shall not suffer what envy and covetousness this will gin up—this comes as an enormous relief.

I don't often find it easy to preach on the psalms, especially such a well-known and beloved psalm as this one. The challenge of coming up with something coherent to say about these poems—which I think are better to be proclaimed and let to stand on their own—is usually more than I can meet. But during Lent, as we contemplate what salvation in Christ and him crucified might actually look like in the world, perhaps this one line from this one psalm conjures up one characteristic of it quite nicely.