

Psalm 23 in conversation (Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18)

This familiar text takes on new dimensions when read in tandem with this week's epistle and gospel texts.

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If familiarity breeds complacency, the lectionary's inclusion of the beloved but familiar 23rd Psalm risks drawing a collective yawn from occupants of pulpit and pew.

The psalm appears six times in the Revised Common Lectionary's three-year cycle. This includes the Fourth Sunday of Easter all three years..

The lectionary's favor, of course, does not account for the psalm's broad appeal; almost every funeral over which I have presided has included Psalm 23 (yea, even in the King James Version of the Bible), its lines of comfort and assurance testifying to the goodness and mercy of the One who shepherds us in life and in death. The prolific psalm is the subject of many an essay, including [one I wrote for the Century in 2016](#).

Yet long before I began presiding over funerals or writing magazine essays, Psalm 23 had already woven its way into the sinews of my being. I expect the same is true for

many practitioners of Judaism or Christianity. Having memorized “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want” as children, we encounter again this week a psalm we know by heart.

But in the same way that green pastures look different in morning and evening light, Psalm 23 takes on new dimensions when read in tandem with this week’s epistle and gospel texts. Unless we are willing to re-examine and challenge our assumptions about what we think we see and hear in this familiar psalm, we will miss some of the playful ways light cascades through Psalm 23 onto its lectionary neighbors and reflects back again, like stained glass painting a new, colorful image onto a sanctuary floor.

In this week’s reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” No one in Jesus’ hearing would have missed the obvious allusion to Hebrew scripture. This proclamation serves as one of Jesus’ seven “I am” statements that collectively declare his oneness with the God of Israel. Psalm 23 opens, “The Lord is my shepherd”; Jesus draws upon that image to reveal his shared identity with the Lord who is both the good shepherd and the great “I Am.”

The reading from 1 John continues the collaborative conversation among this week’s lectionary texts: Jesus is who he claims to be, for not only has he self-identified as the good shepherd, but also he has done what he foretold the good shepherd would do. Jesus says, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” The epistle writer witnesses to the fulfillment of Jesus’ words, adding a charge for Jesus’ disciples to follow suit: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Perhaps a less obvious connection exists between Psalm 23 and this week’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles. When earthly “rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family” put Peter and his fellow prisoners on trial, they inquire, “By what power or by what name did you do this?”

Peter’s Spirit-led response is one that witnesses to the power of the crucified and risen Jesus, who rules not as a tyrant but as one who supports (i.e. a cornerstone) and saves. In contrast to the condemning actions of the leaders doing the questioning, Jesus’ acts of salvation are like those of a shepherd who comforts, anoints, and pursues with goodness and mercy the flock entrusted to his care.