

Your World . . . In Ninety Seconds

Text: Psalm 23; John 10: 1-6

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It's early morning at our house and Pam is the first one up. She's always been one who seizes the day as I slowly stir. As a part of our waking-up ritual she turns on the TV to let me know that morning has arrived; and I, in turn, know it's time to rise and shine when I hear Charlie Rose on CBS This Morning say: "Your World in Ninety Seconds."

But I am growing bone-weary of waking up to the news. It's outright overwhelming: there's just so much anguish and confusion to absorb; racism mixed with other isms, too; police under attack; Brexit and the stability of Europe; terror in Nice; an attempted coup in Turkey; another mass shooting in Munich only two days ago; and just about the craziest race for president that anyone can ever remember.

And honestly, before I so much as open my eyes it feels like I've had enough. I want to pull my pillow over my head do a retake on the night. And that's a pretty odd for me because I love life, and I enjoy people, I want to be in the know about what's going on, and I hunger to be informed and engaged, no matter the day.

I wonder: Do you know what I mean? It's only 7 AM and I need something to calm me down – already! I need to find my moorings; to gain ballast and balance for the spinning world; and, in the optimism of Julian of Norwich to ground myself believing that . . . "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

And so I've taken to reciting a simple prayer as my morning practice before my feet so much as hit the floor. It has become my own antidote to Charlie Rose's ninety-second immersion in real time. Sometimes I run the phrases in my mind, other times the words cross my lips, but either way they give me strength to begin again. Trace them with me as I remind and invite you.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff - they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Rabbi Harold Kushner imagines this Psalm as a drama played out in three acts. Everything is serene, calm, and pastoral as the curtain rises. The images are profoundly soothing: a shepherd to protect, a want-less world, sheep lying down for rest, green pastures inviting, and still waters reflecting the sky like a mirror of quiet blue.

Did you know that greens and blues actually calm the human soul?¹ People who study such things help us to know that bright colors like orange and red command us, even

expect something from us. They elicit our response and arousal. They call our attention to rise. But more subtle colors, blues and greens, softer colors, have a calming, healing, therapeutic effect.

Wise are those who pay attention to this - and we have to slow down to do it. It's one of those times in the Bible where a single detail so easily missed holds a clue and invites us deeper. In amazing design of God's palette this Shepherd's Psalm invokes rest and restoration just by identifying color!

The genre here is, in Krister Stendahl's words, "not history minus, but poetry plus."² And the power of the poetry is unleashed in the colors. I suspect that soft greens and blues are why so many of us head off for the mountains and hills or the ocean and its waves when it comes time for vacation.³ Our hearts seek the secret of calm.

But the Psalm takes us deeper as we meet the valley of the shadow. Green pastures and still waters, rest and restoration fade as the next images invoke more gravity like darkness and death, shadows and evil and fear.

Robert Frost rightly noted that the Psalmist was one "acquainted with the night."⁴ The actual word in the Hebrew here means "a place of deep darkness." And we all know and learn quickly that such darkness comes in many forms: the sudden loss of a job; death or grief; an unanticipated crisis; loneliness or divorce or estrangement; a detour that changes every thing. But though act two begins in the shadow, it ends with a deeper sense for God's continued care.

A colleague of my acquaintance once had a stroke. He slumped over at a meeting, and in an instant everything in his life changed. Months of slow recovery led to bitterness and anger. His wife, in distress, called a friend who made a visit the next day and said to them both, "If you live this experience with bitterness it will drive you away from God. If you live it with gratitude it will draw you closer to God."

So my friend and his wife, still in the valley of the shadow, began to focus every day on what they still had and life turned toward a new and hopeful future. (That wise visitor, incidentally, was Henri Nouwen with whom they shared a close friendship.)

Act three takes a stride deeper, one toward maturation. The Psalmist knew this truth. He realized that through all that had come to pass his understanding of God had grown and changed. It was a deep inner shift that now offered him something more permanent, a relationship that would become his true and deepest home.

Do you remember George Gershwin's show-tune⁵ "Someone To Watch Over Me?" However romantically construed, he put this fundamental and universal human longing to music. And that's what the Psalm is suggesting about God, too. It's the very basic need to know that somewhere in the broad reach of this universe, somewhere in your life and mine, farther than the sky, deeper than the ocean, there is Someone watching

over; Someone who, beyond our capacity to measure or comprehend surely watches over us. too.

Do you remember the tennis star Arthur Ashe? He contracted the AIDS virus through a transfusion and as he faced that illness he wrote a book about his life.⁶ A part of that story is how he came to the realization that even though he was going to die, everything would really be okay; and that the meaning of life was far larger than his own small story. That in and through it all there is something, Someone, that abides, come what may. Someone, beyond, more, abiding, transcendent.

Well now, this is plenty and enough for this morning. But honestly, it speaks to my heart's hunger these unsettled days. I hope it does that for you in some manner, too.

As for Charlie Rose who reminds us of the world with ninety seconds of sometimes-too-much: remember the larger story along side of all of those images.

And do trust this, as I do. Come what may, beyond our smaller understandings: "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Amen.

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¹ Harold Kushner. The Lord Is My Shepherd. Knopf Books, 2003, p. 39.

² Peter Gomes. The Good Book. Harper San Francisco, 2002, p. 209.

³ Kushner; p. 39.

⁴ Martin Copenhaver. Room to Grow. Eerdmans Books, 2015, p. 23.

⁵ Kushner; p. 18.

⁶ Arthur Ashe. Days of Grace. Knopf Books, 1993.