

## “For You Are With Me ...”

**P**salm 23 is one of those Bible passages that just about everyone knows. Even people who rarely darken the doors of a church, or who may have never read the Bible with any serious intent, or whose faith may at best be described as rudimentary, somehow are able to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm almost flawlessly. And I think the reason for this is because just about everybody has been to a funeral, where one of the passages of Scripture most likely to be read is Psalm 23. For that reason, the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm is often associated with death, which is unfortunate because it's really a psalm about life.

Whenever we read the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, in *any* of its English translations, it has a lot to offer to the reader: I'm talking about things like

the assurance that God watches over us like a shepherd watches over his sheep, and

the assurance that God meets our needs for things like food, shelter, and security.

However, when we look at the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm in its original Hebrew, a few more things come to light, and especially when we examine the psalm's physical structure.

For example, and according to Old Testament scholar James Limburg, in its original Hebrew version, the exact middle of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm is found in the fourth verse, in the statement, “for you are with me.” As it turns out, there are twenty-six Hebrew words before that statement, and twenty-six Hebrew words after it. And because of this obviously deliberate structural design, the statement “for you are with me” is revealed to be the thematic center or axis of this psalm; everything else revolves around it. With this in mind, we can begin to ask the question, “What is the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm *really* all about?”

Well, clearly, it's about the relationship between shepherds and their sheep, and it lists some of the attributes of that relationship. However, the point I think the psalmist is trying to make— and especially when we consider how the

author has constructed this psalm— the point the author is trying to make is that the most important attribute of shepherds, and the most important attribute of shepherding, is the ability to *be* with someone— “for you are with me”— to be fully present with someone.

To be honest, that surprised me, but maybe only because we live in a culture where people seem to value tangible skills and abilities— attributes evidenced by high test scores, or a proven track record, or hands-on experience. In fact, if someone were interviewing people for the job of a shepherd, I can imagine them asking questions like:

“How many flocks of sheep have you shepherded?”

or

“What is the survival rate of the sheep under your care?”

or

“At the end of your previous job, were the sheep healthier than when you began?”

In other words, as a society, we tend to place a higher value on what people can *do*, when the 23rd psalm is suggesting that we should be placing the highest value on what people can *be*. Can they *be present* with someone in need?

Now, having said that, we might want to ask, “What does ‘being present’ even look like?”

Back in 2008, a 70-year-old Bill Hansbury was learning to live with a prosthetic leg, after losing his right leg to a staph infection. He had been a marathon runner and cyclist before his amputation, and Hansbury had just regained the ability to ride his bike when, one day, coming up to a stop sign, he couldn’t get his feet out of the pedals. So, he steered the bicycle over to the curb; and that’s when a car pulled up next to him.

In that car was 7-year-old Jake Bainter, whose parents were driving him to the hospital where, in just a few

hours, Jake would be undergoing the amputation of *his* right leg. You see, when he was 3 years old, Jake had been injured in a lawnmower accident; and when numerous surgeries had failed to repair the damage, he and his parents had opted for an elective amputation.

And so, after pulling up to a stop next to Bill Hansbury's bicycle, Jake's parents got out of their car, and they introduced themselves, and their son, to Hansbury. And they explained what Jake had been through during the previous four years, and what he was about to undergo. It was at that point that Bill Hansbury took the opportunity to provide Jake with some words of assurance; after which each went on their way.

That was back in 2008. Four years later, in 2012, Bill and Jake were reunited to tell their tale to NPR's StoryCorps. And, recalling that day, Hansbury said:

“I remember saying that if I could do it at my age— and I was 70, and you were 7— you were going to do this so fast and so well. ... And I was trying to give you some hope, because I knew what was coming, having been there. And when we parted, all I could think about was where you were going and how brave you were in doing it.”

And then Jake said, “Thank you. That day that we met, that will always be implanted in my mind.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Hansbury replied. “A lot of people think that miracles are big things— and they are big things— but they can have very, very small beginnings.”

And so, for a very short period of time, and during a purely random encounter on the side of a street, a 70-year-old Bill Hansbury was shepherd to a 7-year-old Jake Bainter, simply through the gift of his presence.

Why is presence is important? I think because presence has the ability to transform people and situations. Presence is like the mustard seed that Jesus talked about in one of his parables; it's the smallest of seeds but grows into a very

large bush that provides a place of shelter for all the birds. I mean, presence can *seem* to be just a small thing, even an insignificant thing, but its effects can be *huge*; just ask Jake Bainter. And that's why presence is so very important.

There's another structural element to the 23rd psalm that illustrates this point very nicely. If you look at verses 1, 2, and 3 of the psalm, the author's relationship with the shepherd is described in fairly impersonal language: "*The Lord is my shepherd ... he makes me lie down ... he revives my soul.*" But in verses 4, 5, and 6, the relationship is expressed in terms that are very personal: "*You are with me ... you spread a table before me ... you have anointed my head with oil ... your goodness and mercy shall follow me.*" It's almost as if the psalmist is standing in that white space on the page between verses 3 and 4; and he looks back into his past, in the first three verses, and recalls what the shepherd *has done*; he sees that the shepherd was there when he was in need; he sees that the shepherd was present with him; and from that vantage point, he can look forward, through the next three verses, to his future, and, based on what's transpired earlier, he can look at his future with confidence, and even hope.

I think that's what happened in that encounter between Bill Hansbury and Jake Bainter. For a few minutes, Bill and Jake stood, if you will, in that white space on the page between verses 3 and 4, where they could look back at Bill's experience; and that gave Jake the ability to face his own future with a bit more courage and hope.

That is the power of presence!

Several year ago, I was sitting beside a hospital bed, listening to a man tell me all about his terminal cancer; and how his wife was having difficulty with his prognosis and so didn't visit him; and how his children lived so very far away and couldn't visit him; and how very lonely he was. I recall that some prayers were said, but mostly we simply sat together, holding hands.

And a few years after that, I sat with a woman in an intensive care unit, while her husband was being removed from life support. As I recall, we said some prayers, but mostly we sat together, shared stories, and waited, each in the presence of the other.

And in each case, I did *nothing* remarkable— nothing that any of you couldn't also do— I simply spent a little bit of time with each, in that space between verses 3 and 4, and I think that was enough.

You see, sometimes when you're practicing the ministry of presence with someone, what you're really saying to them is this:

“I don't know what I can say or do to make this situation any better; but at the very least I can stay with you for a while, so you don't have to face it alone.”

And, sometimes, that's all a person needs.

In the very middle of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, the psalmist is reminding us that, when we are in need, God is with us. And that, when we are in need, God can be with us through the people who are with us.

You see, the thing is, that while the practice of presence is at the very heart of pastoral ministry— it's really the essence of what Fr. Jeff and I do— what's really remarkable is that a person *doesn't* have to be wearing a clerical collar to be good at it. You don't need any particular education, or special training, to be able to do it or be good at it; you just need the *willingness* to do it.

And so, may God, who has been present with you, at so many times, and through so many people, enable *you*, and empower *you* to bring his presence to others, as the bearers of comfort, peace, and hope.

Amen.