

## Easter IV

*“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.... Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me.... Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”*

These words come from this week’s reading of Psalm 23, one of the most beloved and idyllic passages in Holy Scripture. While we do not know the authors or the specific dating of any of the Psalms, the Book of Psalms eventually became the hymnbook of Jewish worship. The Book of Psalms continues to be a great spiritual gift to us, as Christian folk, from our Hebrew ancestors. The neat thing about the Book of Psalms is that every Psalm provides a spiritual journey within itself and we, as readers or hearers, can receive strength and nourishment from each specific Psalm.

As I mentioned, Psalm 23 is one of the most beloved of the Psalms. While not actually written by King David, to whom it is often attributed, scholars seem to think this specific Psalm is one of the more ancient writings within the book of Psalms and may well go back to the time of David’s reign as king of the Israelites. It is also believed that this psalm was not penned by a young, exuberant believer but by a person who had experienced a long life filled with numerous contentious moments that had both challenged and honed him or her as a person. The author had come to believe that at every moment within his journey, Yahweh, his God, was his provider, his comforter, his strength and his sustainer. This Psalmist, within the depth of his being, is compelled to write to his contemporaries and to us saying this God, the God I worship, yearns to offer you that same presence within your heart and within your mind and within your soul.

It is sometimes difficult to accept the idea that our God is a personal God, a God intimately concerned about our individual well-being and yet this ancient Psalmist urges us to accept such an understanding. The coming of Jesus himself into this existence is a sign that

we are beloved people of a caring and ever present God. The life of the Psalmist informs us of course that being the beloved of God offers no assurance that life will be a gentle journey in a placid world. There may be times in our lives when we feel as though more time is spent in the valley of frustration or anxiety or fear than at the mountain top filled with beauty and joy and wonder. There may be times when we feel less than loved by some around us or that I am having a difficult time with folks understanding or appreciating who I am. These feelings are real; they can be painful and debilitating.

One of the values of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is the pronouncement by the Psalmist that we are never, never alone. The Psalmist writes, “for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.... surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” This God, as was true for the Psalmist, is our provider, our comforter, our strength and our sustainer. The valleys in our lives may not always be made smooth but they can be traversed with confidence, strength and fortitude. The joys and wonders of our mountain top experiences can be enhanced and valued even more because of the presence of the spirit igniting, illuminating and expanding our vision and our discernment. The Lord is our shepherd, the caretaker of our lives. Our spiritual journey begins with God’s call upon our lives; it is sustained by God’s presence and our journey concludes in God’s loving embrace in this life and the life to come.

Amen