

Psalm 23: It Pertains To Everything
The Rev. Dr. Martha Tucker
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Blessed be God who animates our lives and offers us gifts in creation which cause us to utter praise and thanksgiving in the face of challenges and chaos. AMEN

The Swan

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air -
An armful of white blossoms,
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
Biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
A shrill dark music - like the rain pelting the trees - like a waterfall
Knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds -
A white cross Streaming across the sky, its feet
Like black leaves, its wings Like the stretching light of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?

- Mary Oliver

Questions can be off-putting triggering defenses yet sometimes they are so clarifying as to cause us to lean in.

In this poem by Mary Oliver in which she uses a series of questions to invoke a description of a swan in an ironic and majestic transition from burdened to free flight, darkness into light, encumbered into unbound and liberated, one question caught me up short: And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?

It seems to me that often we obtain revelations in moments of paradoxical beauty.

Sometimes when I hear Psalm 23 this is exactly the question which resonates.

Psalm 23, more familiar to many than the Lord's Prayer, and to others a creedal statement in itself. Psalm 23 grounds the Judaic and Christian traditions. Psalm 23 comforts, guides, calls, inspires, and assures.

And today as I come here to preach after yet another shooting, come here for the toomanyeth time to preach a word of hope and faith and mercy and justice, there it is; the song which pertains to everything. the song which grounds our faith...

Moreover, today the song is couched in the context not only of good shepherd readings but of readings which promise a gathering of ALL into a great multitude, whitewashed in the blood of the lamb, having become the very glory which we pursue and which pursues us! Paradoxical beauty...

It is couched in a miraculous healing story in which a woman of faith and charity, Tabitha, comes to life at the prayers of Peter, who has taken on the messianic power of the Risen Christ. More paradoxical beauty...

As we move through the process of being sanctified and united with the God who created us, sustains us, and redeems us, we move through valleys green with grace and shrouded in the shadows of death. We move through valleys, on our pilgrimages on this earth assured of God's sovereignty, not in the royal glitzy sovereign way but in the humble servitude and resurrection unexpected way which we have come to know through the life and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We appear at times huddled like the swan on a black river or at other times like a cross in the sky with arms raised to bless.

And as Psalm 23 reminds us *God's* divine sovereignty, the Kingdom of God, holds all things and makes all thing new....including anxiety and chaos. This unexpected Lord and Shepherd unbinds us and causes us to fly.

Psalm 23 tells us that this Lord who is/ has got this...we are to fear no evil.

It Doesn't say accept evil, doesn't say it won't happen...says don't fear it.

For this is the God who pours hope and comfort into our lives...whose goodness and mercy don't just exist but pursue us!
This is the God whose pursuit of us takes the form of anointing our head with oil that we might be blessed and preparing a table before us in the presence of our enemies that we might know perfect communion.

Many might say no thanks...I will invite my own guests...but that is exactly the point.

In Revelation we learn that this great multitude envisioned at the end times is of everyone, including our enemies. This is not a saccharine universalism but a promise of the life eternal obtainable through faith.

And there we have it...the f word: FAITH

Psalm 23 pertains to everything and everything is our faith in God.

Rabbi Howard Kushner has written a book of meditations on the 23d psalm. He wrote it in large part as a response to the death of his 14 year old son from an incurable disease. After a beautiful and poignant and scholarly explication of the verses of the psalm he says: The twenty-third Psalm is the answer to the question, "How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world?"

There he has framed my dilemma, he has addressed my angst today. He has acknowledged that the psalm pertains to everything including deep sorrow.

And his question stands firmly alongside Mary Oliver's poetic one as a reminder to all of us to worship, behold the goodness of the Lord, to pray and study Scripture that we might know how to live in this dangerous world. Because in this reverence for creation, in this reverence for who and whose we are, lies the knowledge that pertains to everything.

God's sovereignty will calm our fears
God's sovereignty will feed us
God's sovereignty will protect us
God's sovereignty will gather us into a realm of no tears and living water

I was reminded this week of a [Flannery O'Connor](#) story, "Revelation." The story ends at sunset with the protagonist—a spiteful, judgmental woman named Mrs. Turpin—envisioning a great horde of people tumbling toward heaven. The first people she sees in the crowd are the very people she's spent the day despising, black people and poor people and uneducated people, "battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs."

What's really great about the story, someone said, is that these people are at the beginning of the line. All of the people who consider themselves respectable and dignified—those with money and education and privilege, like Mrs. Turpin—are marching at the end of the line. They're the last to get into heaven.

But what matters in the end,, is that everyone is in line. Everyone. Poor and rich, white and black, old and young, judgmental and judged. As

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they march their way to heaven, Mrs. Turpin hears "the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah." That hallelujah belongs to everyone, everyone...¹

Our moments of deepest revelation may be tinged with the most paradoxical form of beauty, the painful and lovely sense of gratitude that hits us when we realize two things: God's grace is far more expansive than we would ever wish it to be, and it's only because of that surplus that we too are among the saved.

To live in this world and to live into those approaching end times and to answer Rabbi Kushner's question of the how of it: we are to be the Tabithas and do good works of charity and to be the Peters and become the instruments of Resurrection power, we are to walk through our valleys fearing no evil, receiving the grace of God, giving thanks and doing justice where we can.

We are to in the words of the prophet Micah: [To act justly and to love mercy and walk humbly with our God" Micah 6:8](#)

That is how we are to live, how we are to change our lives.
That is the answer to Oliver's question have we seen the beauty and changed our lives
That is the answer to Rabbi Kushner's How to Live

When we live into these questions which pertain to everything, we will be gathered up into that multitude and cry: Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever AMEN

¹ Adapted a story told about Flannery O'Conner in Christian Century sermon by Elizabeth Palmer

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May you know this paradoxical beauty now, may you be transformed by it, and may you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls you by name.