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They, You, I - Reflections on the 23rd Psalm for Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday

Psalm 23

From The Bible in Basic English 1 The Lord takes care of me as his sheep; I will not be without any good thing. 2 He makes a resting-place for me in the green fields: he is my guide by the quiet waters. 3 He gives new life to my soul: he is my guide in the ways of righteousness because of his name. 4 Yes, though I go through the valley of deep shade, I will have no fear of evil; for you are with me, your rod and your support are my comfort. 5 You make ready a table for me in front of my haters: you put oil on my head; my cup is overflowing. 6 Truly, blessing and mercy will be with me all the days of my life; and I will have a place in the house of the Lord all my days.

From Eugene Petersen's translation entitled The Message. 1 God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. 2 You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. 3 True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction. 4 Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure. 5 You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing. 6 Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.

If you were here last Sunday, you heard how translation can be theologically crucial – in Paul's words to the Ephesians it matters enormously whether we translate his words as "give thanks **for** all things" or "give thanks **over** all things." The former seems to make God responsible for every evil that happens and this is something we don't want to say! Translations are never easy. Even in English, John Kennedy's remark that the United States and England are two countries separated by a common language is true in many other ways as well. Bostonians and southern Californians have so many different terms for different things and the same is true of many other places. And any translation of the Bible can become "stale" when words undergo a change of meaning. The 16th century's use of the word "charity" means something entirely different than it does for us today – then "charity" meant more or less what we

mean by the word “love.”

You see, in any translation of the Bible, *decisions* must be made because not only are our culture and situation so very different from that of the ancient Palestinian Jews and Christians, but also because the Hebrew and Greek of the original writings are simply very, very different in their form, their structure, their grammar. One small example: In Hebrew, there are no vowels; thus, translators sometimes have to guess at a word’s meaning and different guesses at vowels can lead to very different meanings. Imagine if that were true in English, and imagine that you are a translator faced with the following two letters: “M” and “L” – but there are no vowels. Is it supposed to be translated as “male” or “mule” (well, maybe those are the same, sometimes), or “mile” or “mole” or “meal”? The phrase “going the second mile” is rather different from “going the second meal”!

The place, though, I want to focus today’s sermon is this: Translators are often faced with the choice of rendering verses in the “first person” – *“The Lord is my shepherd”* or in the “third-person” – *“He makes me lie down in green pastures”* – or in the “second-person” **addressing** God – *“Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”* More succinctly, it’s the difference between saying *“I am,” “You are,”* and *“He is.”*¹ All three forms can be found in most any translation of the Lord’s Prayer. And all three forms are present in our two translations for today; the opening of this Psalm in the Bible in Basic English’s translation is in the third person: *“The Lord takes care of me as his sheep.”* It is a statement about someone else; it is a description; it’s third-person. But Eugene Petersen’s translation of that first verse is very simple, very personal, almost intimate, and rendered in the first person: *“God, my shepherd!”* And one more thing: Virtually every translation of the 23rd Psalm makes a turn midway through to the **second**-person, to the writer addressing God directly: *“You are with me, your rod and*

¹Cf., e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammatical_person

your support are my comfort.”

Alright. What do we do with all of that? And what might this seemingly arcane grammar lesson have to teach us? And, finally, what might this have to say to us on Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday? Well, let me suggest this:

“Third-person” statements are statements of description. *So-and-so is like this. This is the way things are. Kansas City has the best barbecue.* Most theological statements are third-person too: *God is love. God is just. Jesus Christ rose from the dead.* And so on and so on. Third-person statements are the kind that we discuss together. They form that web of ideas that we refer to if someone asks us what we believe. And as such, they are discussable, we can reason about them with other people. And we should. Oh my, we definitely should. One of the best things about the church, something that was recognized from at least the time of the Protestant reformation in the 1500s, is that the church at its best is to be the place where our beliefs about God are formed and shaped and even sometimes challenged by other people. Because without the practice of other people taking your ideas about God seriously enough to discuss them with you, it’s possible to end up with some pretty bizarre or even hurtful ideas about God. One example: if you believe that God is the sort of God from whom you must **earn** your salvation, **earn** your forgiveness, **earn** His love, then you are holding an idea that will make you anxious every day of your life and which is at odds with the gospel. Having other people to help you correct and sharpen your beliefs is one of the best things that church folks do for one another. It’s why we have our regular Bible studies and other kinds of classes – to help us to firm up and sometimes change our beliefs about God in light of the Good News of the Gospel, for we always need to make sure that the things we say about God make moral sense.

But as crucial as it is to have morally credible beliefs about God that are consistent with the Gospel, that is not enough. One’s faith, as Jesus reminded us,

needs to include loving God with all one's **mind**, but it also includes loving God with all one's **heart** or **soul**. Which means that faith is not simply about having good beliefs but is also about having a life-giving **relationship** with God. In today's psalm, David, the future king of Israel, affirms that fact and acknowledges his own relationship with God – not just the things that he knows, but the things that he feels deep down inside, the things that give him life. It happens in his turn to the second-person in this Psalm. Did you hear it? At a crucial point in the Psalm, David **addresses** God, using the second-person: He says this: *"...you are with me, your rod and your support are my comfort"* and *"You make ready a table for me in front of my haters: you put oil on my head; my cup is overflowing."* Do you hear the difference here between the third-person **description** of what God is like, and this second-person way of **speaking to** God? The first is like you're saying that so-and-so your good friend; the second is like you're speaking **to** so-and-so and thanking him for being the kind of friend he is. The first is a **description**, the second is a **testimony**. The first is **objective**; the second is **intimate** and **personal** as fits a relationship that is intimate and personal. And that's what David is doing in his Psalm when he says 'O God, *"your rod and your staff comfort me; you put oil on my head; you feed me even in the midst of threats to my life."* It is as if David is saying: *"God, in the midst of trials your leading and your protection has been such a comfort; in the midst of those times when life is like a dry and hot desert you have ministered to me with oil for my soul that has made my life less dry and hurtful; and even when life and people and circumstances trouble me still you nourish me body, mind, and soul."*

But there is one more turn in the Psalm, the turn to the "first person." We hear it in the opening and closing verses. The Psalm opens with, in the more traditional translation, *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want"* and closes with *"I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* These are not just **descriptions**, and they are not

speaking **to** God. On the face of it, it may look like David is just speaking to himself. But it is much, much more than that. This turn to the first person represents not **description** but **decision**. It represents not intimacy but **intention**. And thus it signals something very important for your life and mine: that no matter what we may *know*, and no matter what our *relationship* with God might be, finally and ultimately and always **we must decide how we will *respond* to that knowledge and relationship, how we will decide to act and react in *recognition* of that relationship**. And David decides that he will trust God. David decides that in his actions he will indeed seek to honor what he knows about God and his relationship with God. He decides to act as if his life is indeed under the care of God and that he will not want in any **ultimate** sense. Ultimately and finally, David **commits** himself in that opening and closing verses of the Psalm to act as if indeed God was finally in charge, that God was finally ultimate not the hurtful things of the world, that God would supply the deepest and most important of his needs. And that's **decision**, not description!

But it could have gone differently, you know. David could have said after all that description of God, all that acknowledgment of his relationship with God, that nevertheless he was going to act as if the world was out to get him, as if God didn't really have the ultimate say in and guarantee for his life. He *could* have **decided** to act as if it were his job to build his house that would stand forever, rather than trusting God's promise that God would give him an eternal dwelling place. But he didn't. He trusted God. And he acted.

So, my friends, did Martin Luther when he began what became the Protestant Reformation in the early 1500s by nailing his protests about church practices to the door of the Wittenberg church. He too moved from description – he **knew** what was wrong with the church – to **decision** and **action**. He could have just muttered to himself and made accommodations with what he saw as corrupt practices, but he

didn't. At great risk to himself he didn't. Instead what he said was this: *"God help me, here I stand; I can do no other."* He trusted God. And he acted.

And so did his namesake, Martin Luther King, Jr. Tomorrow we celebrate the only Federal holiday that is in honor of a Christian minister of the Gospel, and what I will give thanks for is that, indeed, Dr. King also trusted God and decided to **act**. He too moved from **description** to **decision** and action. He too could have just muttered to himself and made accommodations with what he saw as corrupt practices, but he didn't. He decided to honor what he knew and honor his relationship with God by courageous action that eventually martyred him. His own words are more eloquent than mine can ever be as he speaks about this move from third-person to first-person, from knowledge to action, in his eloquent *"Letter From a Birmingham Jail."* Birmingham, you'll recall, is where arsonists firebombed a Black church, injuring scores of people gathered to worship, and killing four young girls as they sat dressed in their Sunday finest at Sunday School to learn about God. Yet, in the face of that situation, some of the Birmingham citizens had pleaded with Dr. King to "go slow"; here is part of his response that moves indeed from knowledge to a call for decision and action:

... when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; ...when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six- year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that [it] is closed to colored children... [and] when your first name becomes "nigger," ... then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when ...injustice must be exposed... to the light of human conscience.... Human progress... comes through the tireless efforts of men [and women who are] willing to be co-workers with God.... Now is the time to make real the

*promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood.*²

Knowledge and relationship; third-person and second-person – each is important. But finally, my friends, in all our lives, there are those moments that demand that we move to the **first**-person, to decision and to action, to live out our beliefs, to show our trust in God, to follow the gentle shepherd where He would lead us.

Is there something in your life that you are accommodating but know that you shouldn't? Is there something that, as a Christian, deeply troubles your conscience about something in society? Then, my friends, David and his lovely and powerful Psalm invites you to prayerfully move to action, with thanksgiving for those who, like Dr. King, have helped show the way and who can inspire your courage to change. And as we do so, we take heart and comfort in exactly what David said: "The Lord **is** my shepherd." He is indeed. He is indeed.

²Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," www.thekingcenter.org/prog/non/Letter.pdf