

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton

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Psalm 23: Good Verbs

I am most moved by the spiritual depth and wisdom of the psalms, but as a lover of words, I cannot help but appreciate the language of the psalms. Psalm 23 has some seriously lovely language. It has fantastic nouns: shepherd, pastures, waters, soul - and that's just in the first couple of verses.

Many of these nouns are further deepened by some stellar adjectives. The pastures of this psalm are green; its waters are still; its paths are right. But the good verbs are what make this psalm truly transcendent. A few of the verbs are in first person - assigned to the psalmist, or the person borrowing the psalmist's words for their own prayer - but they're mostly verbs in the negative. As in I shall NOT want, I shall not fear. The two action verbs that are straightforwardly assigned to the speaker seem to be contradictory. I walk through the darkest valley; yet I dwell in the house of the Lord.

How can the psalmist be in two places at the same time? Especially two such radically different places? Dark valleys are treacherous, full of risk and danger. The valley of the shadow of death, as some translations render it. And yet, there it is again: I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

The only way I can make sense of this impossible paradox is through the abundance of good verbs assigned to our good God in this psalm. Psalm 23 does not cast a vision of a disinterested God who creates the world and then walks away. Psalm 23 paints a portrait of a God who acts, a shepherd who shepherds.

Consider the verbs: the Lord makes, leads, and restores. The Lord prepares and anoints. And perhaps the most subtle but significant verb the psalmist assigns to our sacred shepherd: to be. THE LORD IS.

In a world that often scrapes away at our capacity for faith and trust in a God who is God, the word "is" is actually kind of a big deal.

And then, conjugated into a different form, the verb “to be” shows up again, in the second person: you are with me. What a prayer. You are with me. What a blessing, to turn this around and speak it to another: God is with you. This is why I repeat the same benediction each and every week. It just seems most what my beloved flock needs to hear.

When we know God is with us - even in the darkest of valleys - making, leading, restoring, preparing, and anointing, anywhere can become holy ground. We can even feast in the presence of our enemies without fear.

When we are deeply rooted in faith, we are like little snails, carrying our houses with us everywhere we go, except the house we inhabit is no fragile shell, but the very household of the Lord.

Even goodness and mercy get to have a good verb assigned to them by the psalmist. They follow you. I’ve always loved that line best. Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. The enemy isn’t following us. Goodness and mercy are following us.

Since this sermon became something of a grammar lesson, here’s one more glorious grammatical note: this whole psalm takes place in the present tense. The psalmist is not speaking of the days of yore. This prayer is not aching for a future that is not yet. This psalm is happening right now, as we pray it.

So, take a few moments this week to contemplate how this psalm is true for you today: How is God acting to restore your soul? How is God transforming even your darkest valleys into places where goodness and mercy nip at your heels?

The God who was, and is, and ever shall be is in our midst, and on the move. And how do we respond to such goodness? With worship. Now that’s a glorious verb. Let us worship our wondrous God in ever deeper and fuller ways as the choir blesses us with the *Jazz Missa Brevis*. Amen.