

WORDS TOO FAMILIAR

PSALM 23

The Fourth Sunday of Easter – May 3, 2009

University Church of Chicago

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One of America's great storytellers was Marshall Dodge, who was killed in a hit-and-run accident in 1982 when he was at the height of his popularity. One of his stories is about a certain Southern lady who returned home after spending the summer in the mountains. Her friend Georgeanne met her at the railway station.

"Georgeanne, has there been any news while I've been away?"

"Oh, no. No news—except your dog died." "My dog died? How did my dog die?" "He ate some of the burnt horseflesh, and that's what killed your dog?"

"Burnt horseflesh?" "Well, after the fire cooled off, the dog ate some of the burnt horseflesh. That's what killed him."

"Fire cooled off? What fire?" "Well, your barn burned down, burned up all the cows and horses, and when the fire cooled down, the dog ate some of the burned horseflesh. Killed him."

"How did my barn burn down?" "Oh, it was a spark from your house. Blew over, lit the roof of the barn, burned down the barn, burned up all the cows and horses, and when the fire cooled off, the dog ate some of the burnt horseflesh, and that's what killed the dog."

"A spark from the house?" "Oh, yes, now that's completely burned down?"

"But how did my house burn down?" "It was the candle flame that lit the curtains, shot up the side of the wall, and burned down the house. A spark flew over on the roof of the barn, burned down the barn, burned up all the cows and horses, and when the fire cooled off, the dog ate some of the horseflesh. That's what killed the dog."

"Candles? I don't even allow candles in my house. How did candles get into my house?"

"Oh, they were around the coffin." "Coffin. What coffin? Who died?" "Oh, you don't need to worry about that. Since you've been away, your mother-in-law died."

"Oh, my mother-in-law. What a pity. How did she die?"

"Well, some folks say that it was the shock of hearing that your husband had run away with the choir director at the church. But other than that, there ain't been no news since you left."

When we hear the words of the Twenty-third Psalm, we are, I am afraid, very much like Georgeanne. Nothing new. Same ol', same ol'. How familiar are the words, how digestible, how sweet. We can recite them more easily than probably any other words from the Bible except the Lord's Prayer.

This prayer of David undoubtedly shaped the prayer life of Jesus himself, faithful yet radical son of Israel that he was. The words he used about himself: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep....I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (John 10: 11, 14-15).

The image of the sheep and the shepherd are difficult for us city folks to understand, but in the agrarian culture of ancient Israel, before fences contained grazing livestock, shepherds were essential guardians of economic capital. The Israelite marketplace and sacrificial rites required sheep for wool, milk, and for those who could afford it, meat.

In the daily life of the shepherd, however, these fluffy, sweet-appearing creatures could be not only affectionate, but stubborn, stupid, aimless, passive, easily startled and always hungry. Sheep are prone to wander off. They put their heads down and move from one clump of grass to another without being aware of their surroundings. Foxes, wolves and jackals knew this. A shepherd, therefore, needed to be strong but not overpowering. If the shepherd came on too forcefully, the flock would scatter and run away and become even more vulnerable. If the shepherd was too gentle or inattentive, the passivity and distractability of the sheep would bring a host of troubles.

So the depiction of God has both strong and gentle, a constant prodder and defender, leading faithful people on straight paths, spoke—and speaks—to those who follow Jesus.

The psalmist artfully demonstrates God's faithfulness in the environmental descriptions: the green pastures, the still waters, the paths of righteousness. These phrases describe what we as well as sheep need: food, water, a path to travel, places of rest, refreshment and renewed purpose. The word *tsedeq* carries the connotation of normal, right and just. These are not just any paths, but the *right* paths, all for the sake of God's name. God leads the faithful down these paths not only for their benefit, but also that they may glorify God's name in all the earth.

Much of this theology of Psalm 23 depends on our paying attention. Ellen Davis has depicted this in her book, *Wondrous Depths*. She writes of an art instructor who teaches not future artists with talent but future amateurs without talent. The goal is not to make them good artists. It won't happen. It is to teach them to pay attention—to the particular texture of light, of surfaces of depths—to learn to notice how one could draw a particular landscape or building or corner of the room. It is in Davis's words, "to teach them now never to be bored again."

Davis suggests that you and I should read the Bible like "mushroom hunters"—plodding along slowly, unwilling to miss the tiniest detail. Pay attention when you read the Bible. Pay attention to this psalm—and you will see its meaning for you.

Christopher Buckley has written a wonderful memoir about his life with his famous parents, William F. and Patricia Buckley, *Losing Mum and Pup*. “Pup,” the redoubtable father, was, of course, the intelligent (sometimes the only intelligent) spokesperson for the Republican Party, traditional Catholicism and free enterprise on television and through his writings. He wrote seventy books and countless columns while also debating everybody about everything.

“Mum” was beautiful, charming, a nonbeliever in things Catholic and a wonderful liar. She was the kind of person whose mood was always spring-loaded, ready to fire at the slightest provocation. After a few glasses of wine, “Mum was capable of wheeling on, say, Neil Armstrong to inform him that he knew nothing-nothing what-so-ever—about astrophysics or lunar landing. No hostels in history has ever set a better dinner table than my mother, but on such evenings, I would rather have supped with al Qaeda in a guano-strewn cave.”

Christopher Buckley remembers the first time he caught Mum in “some preposterous untruth,” as she called it. She grew up a debutante in a grand house in Vancouver, British Columbia, “the kind of house that even has a name: Shannon. Grant, but Vancouver-grand, which is to say, provincial.”

So one night when Chris was six years old or so, sitting with the grown-ups at the dinner table, he heard Mum announce that “the king and queen always stayed with us when they were in Vancouver.” By “king and queen” she meant the parents of the current queen of England. Chris’s little antennae went *twing!*? “I’d never heard my grandparents refer to a royal visit, which is a pretty big deal. I looked and Mum and realized---*twang!*—that she was telling an untruth. A big untruth. And I remember thinking in that instant how thrilling and grown-up it must be to say something so completely untrue—as opposite to the little amateur fibs I was already practiced at, horrid little apprentice sinner that I was, like the ones about how you’d already said your prayers or washed under your fingernails....This was my introduction to a lifetime of mendacity.”

You and I live in a world of lies, mendacity, preposterous untruths. Biblical writers call them principalities, powers, dominions, names, world rulers, thrones, angels, elemental spirits, demons, princes, strongholds, spirit of the air, serpent, dragon, lion, beast, Beelzebub, Satan, Devil.

William Stringfellow said, “The very array of names and titles in biblical usage for the principalities and powers is some indication of the scope and significance of the subject for human beings. And if some of them seem quaint, transposed into contemporary language they lose quaintness and the principalities become recognizable and all too familiar...Thus, the Pentagon or the Ford Motor Company or the University of Chicago or Commonwealth Edison or the Olympics of the United Church of Christ or the Teamsters Union are all principalities. So are capitalism, Maoism, humanism, Mormonism, astrology, the Puritan work ethic, science and scientism, white supremacy, patriotism, plus many, many more—sports, sex, any profession or discipline, technology, money, the family—beyond any prospect of full enumeration. The principalities and powers are legion.”

The psalmist confronts the demon, the lie we most fear in verse four. A key word is used to illustrate the deceptive quality of evil. It is not the valley of death, but the valley of the death shadow. The Hebrew word for “total darkness” or the “death shadow” is used many times in the Bible, especially in

the trials of Job. We fear death; its shadow lurks over the faithful as well as the faithless. It creates in both a sense of darkness, futility, despair.

But here the psalmist clarifies the personal element of the song. The psalmist shifts from describing God as shepherd to a direct address, emphasizing the intimacy of what Martin Buber called an I-Thou relationship.

In George Bernard Shaw's play, *Don Juan in Hell*, the Devil has most of the good lines. In a very long speech, the Devil makes an attractive case for himself. He also explains the bad press that he has received from the celestial hordes and their earthly admirers. The Devil believes that the false view of him in England is the result of an Italian and an Englishman. The Italian, of course, is Dante, and the Englishman is John Milton. Somewhat gratuitously, Shaw's Devil remarks that like everyone else he has never managed to get all the way through *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*.

In case you are like Shaw's Devil, let me remind you of the story as told by Milton. Lucifer, the Son of Morning, blazes most attractively in *Paradise Lost*. It is Milton's conceit that proud Lucifer, a bored angel, tempts Adam and Eve with the only thing a totalitarian ruler must always keep from his slaves: knowledge. Rather surprisingly, the First Couple choose knowledge. Well—she chooses it. They lose Eden, go forth to breed and die, while Lucifer and his party, expelled from heaven, fall and fall and fall through Chaos and Old Night until they reach rock bottom: Hell.

“Here we may reign secure, and in my choice

To reign is worth ambition though in hell:

Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.”

That valley of the shadow is where we walk, isn't it? Death takes its toll simply by our inability to name it.

To return to Chris Buckley: in *Mum and Pup*, he tells of going to Stamford, Connecticut, and sitting beside his dying mother's hospital bed, holding her limp hand. He found himself suddenly saying to her comatose face, “I forgive you.” Words that had hardly ever been used in the Buckley family. He knew that he could not make peace until he forgave.

We can face the valley of the shadow when we experience forgiveness. Then we can walk in right paths.