

I Shall Not Want

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Desert Rain God, Louisa McElwain

Preaching on:

Psalm 23

I read a lot of poetry. I was an English major. I know, you can tell that I was an English major. I'm not sure it's a compliment, but I get that a lot. I don't just read a poem I love once or twice. I read it over and over and over again. I memorize it. I examine it—I want to know what makes it tick. How does a poet, using the same language, the very same words that might appear on the back of a cereal box, or in the manual that came with your new immersion blender, or inside a billion bot-produced spam emails a day—how are those same little units of language—words—transformed into something

profound, moving, and sometimes even holy? What's the magic formula that makes words that have died on the page right in front of our eyes a thousand times suddenly and beautifully come back to life?

See—I told you—English major. I just can't turn it off. But it's relevant because we just read the 23rd Psalm together. There are lots of prayers in the world, right? But there are only a handful of prayers that we keep coming back to over and over again. What is it about this psalm that keeps bringing us back? Why is it that even though we've heard it a thousand times before, even though we've memorized it, every time we come back to it, it still feels alive, fresh, new?

Now there's all kinds of English major moves we could make on this psalm to explore that question. We could write a book on it. But let's skip over all the smaller reasons today (because frankly it's been a hard week, right?) and go straight to the heart of the matter—the reason we keep coming back to the 23rd Psalm and the reason that we can encounter it over and over again as deeply meaningful is because it is teaching us a lesson that we haven't learned yet. It's teaching us a lesson that our souls know is true, but that our spirits and our minds still haven't really even heard.

The reason that the 23rd Psalm is one of the most prayed prayers in the world, the reason that it stands out as one of the one most beautiful and powerful pieces of scripture in any religion is because the 23rd Psalm doesn't ask for anything. It doesn't ask for anything. The Psalmist doesn't ask God to be their shepherd. The Lord IS my shepherd. The psalmist doesn't ask God for help paying the bills or for protection from disaster. They simply state, I SHALL NOT want. And it goes on just like that for all six verses—this is who God is, this is what God is doing, and therefore I am forever safe, I am completely provided for forever.

And even after a week like we've had—witnessing enormous pain and suffering and hatred and violence and death in Israel and the Gaza Strip—and even on a morning like this when many of us are grieving deep personal losses, the 23rd Psalm doesn't come off as naïve. In fact, in our worst moments we want to come back to this prayer. In our times of greatest sorrow and fear, we return with confidence to the enormous spiritual claim of these words and find them not insufferable, but comforting because we feel in the psalm that the psalmist himself has been through the valley of the shadow of death and has given us the words to understand what we're going through.

Friday night, we had an all-night, sleepover lock in for our confirmation class. It was awesome. We had a ton of fun. It was the best youth event I've ever been to—even the adults had fun. It's a great group of kids. And I know we made memories Friday night that will last them a lifetime. And that's really meaningful.

To inaugurate their confirmation journey, at about 9 p.m. we started "the ritual." Every kid got an envelope. They wrote their name on it. They got six pieces of paper and had to write on each piece of paper some part of their identity—something meaningful to them, good or bad, ways they describe

themselves or ways other people describe them: Student, daughter, soccer player, Black, funny, bad at math, whatever felt most meaningful to them. That all went in the envelope. We turned off all the lights in the whole church and we prayed by candlelight together for a good journey, with each kid adding words to the prayer.

Then we walked in total darkness and silence through the church. We started up high and went down through a really creepy basement and outside and eventually to the sanctuary. There were six candlelit stations along the way. We'd stop at each station and tell a Bible story or read scripture about having to leave something behind, send something away, give something up, or sacrifice something, so that some new thing could be found, or so a new dream could be discovered, or to meet God, or to meet your true self, or your true destiny. At each station we'd ask the kids to look over the pieces of paper in their envelope and that they had to leave one behind to move on to the next station.

The final station was in the dark in the sanctuary. All the kids had left now was an empty envelope with their name on it. And they put that down too, so they were now completely emptyhanded. And then we served them communion, reminding them, number 1, that sometimes to get back to the beginning, to get back to God, to get back to our true selves, we have to let go of everything we're carrying. Another way of saying that is: The Lord IS my shepherd. And, number 2, our God is a God who is providing, even when we have lost everything. Another way of saying that is: I SHALL NOT want.

The whole ritual took an hour, and beloved, we had nine thirteen and fourteen-year-olds and they did not make a single peep, not a giggle or a soda-flavored burp for that entire hour. And when it was over, they walked out of the sanctuary and without being told to do so, they all just sat down at a table and processed their thoughts and feelings in silence. Woah. It worked.

Last week I preached to you about the power of a direct experience of God as opposed to worshipping an idea about God. On Friday night, we turned ideas about God into an experience of God—I believe that's a key component to a living and real religion. And I always want to ensure that the important religious lessons we're teaching our children in church school, in youth group, in confirmation are also being translated into religious experiences.

We keep coming back to the 23rd Psalm because it works. It works for the same reason that "the ritual" worked on Friday night. Neither of them ask God for anything. Both of them trust God for everything. Neither of them provide us with concepts or ideas or theology or morals, instead the 23rd Psalm and "the ritual" both speak directly to the soul. Beloved, you can continue the conversation. The next time you're in need, and asking God for something, shift your perspective from spiritual scarcity to spiritual abundance by praying as well, "I *shall not* want. I *shall not* want." Amen.