

Shepherded by Scripture

April 25, 2021 Scott Gunn

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. —Psalm 23 (Authorized or King James Version)

I have strong memories from several funerals I led during my time as a parish priest. Most of my memories are of families gathered in the church to say goodbye to their loved ones and to hear a word of Easter hope.

One of my strong funeral memories is from a service held at the funeral home. The family was barely connected to the church, but for whatever reason, they asked me to lead the service. They made it pretty clear they weren't looking for anything "too churchy."

I didn't print out leaflets. When it was time for the service, I mostly read the burial office from our prayer book. Those ancient words offer, I think, just the right measure of sorrow and hope. Anyway, when it came time for the scriptures, I read a lesson and then said something like, "I'm going to read Psalm 23 aloud now. If you know the words, you are most welcome to join me." Much to my surprise, when I started, nearly everyone in the room said this beloved psalm from memory.

I have had similar experiences at the bedsides of those near the end of life. Sometimes a person who is beyond the point of conversation will be silent in our prayers until I begin the Lord's Prayer or Psalm 23. Then their lips move, praying along. Generation upon generation have been steeped in these words of liturgy and scripture that go all the way to the core.

But why Psalm 23? I think it is profoundly reassuring. God is our shepherd. When we need companionship, or protection, or guidance, God is there with us. When we face danger, God is there with us. Even at the end of our days, God is there with us.

I worry that in today's church, we don't do enough to encourage people to memorize scripture and prayer so deeply that it gets to our core. When people are in grave crisis or facing their own imminent mortality, how will they be equipped to meet these moments?

In our prayer and study, we prize novelty but at the cost of perseverance and immersion. I hope we can do a better job of balancing the two tensions. In my own life, I hope there are prayers and scriptures that go all the way to my core. I hope that's true for you, too.

The Lord is truly our shepherd. But perhaps the Lord seeks to accompany us at times in the words of scripture. Let us all commit to loving scripture so much it shapes our hearts and our lives.