

Story and Meditation: Overflowing Cup

May 3, 2020

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Good Shepherd Sunday

Psalm 23

by *Eric Anderson*

The 'amakihi was hungry. Frankly, she was always hungry. She was no glutton, no. She was a grazer. She'd take a sip of nectar from an ohi'a lehua here, then a crunch of an insect there, and a dip into a mamane there. She was even known to sample a lilikoi fruit or two.

Her companions found her a little puzzling. They were pretty dedicated to keeping themselves fed, but she never seemed to finish. They would find a good spot for insects and settle in, polish them off, and do something else for a while. She would take one or two, then hop over to the mamane blossom, and then fly to the nearest lobelia in bloom.

"She never starts eating," they laughed to one another, "because she never finishes eating!"

"Do you ever sleep?" they teased.

She didn't mind. She hopped and sipped and flew and dipped and jumped and crunched and fluttered and enjoyed.

One of her friends let the rest of the crowd scatter, and as she checked out another ohi'a lehua, shyly asked, "Why do you eat all the time?"

She looked at him and found no teasing in him. "It's simple," she said. "This world is filled with wonders: wonders to see, wonders to hear, wonders to smell. There are also wonders to taste, and I mean to appreciate every single one if I possibly can."

For her, the world was an overflowing cup.

The 23rd Psalm shows strong parallels with the life of David, the shepherd who became king of Israel. It opens to its dominant image: God the shepherd, guide, and protector. It was a role that David had been familiar with. When the prophet Samuel came to visit his father Jesse's house, David was out with the sheep and had to be summoned to meet him. David the shepherd would have guided his flock to good grass and drinkable water. He would have protected the sheep in the narrow canyons that were the lairs or the hunting ambush points of predators like wolves and lions.

In those dark canyons he may very well have earnestly prayed that God would watch over him.

As a military hero and also as a sweet singer, David found himself adopted into the palace of King Saul who, as time went on, began to suspect that David was supposed to replace him on the throne. As it happened, this was true, because the prophet Samuel had determined to make David king. He anointed him with oil to proclaim it. When the psalm speaks of sitting at a table in the presence of enemies, that was exactly the situation David experienced for some time. Saul even tried to kill David with his own hand, though he seems to have repented and apologized. Eventually, David fled the palace and lived as a rebel leader.

After Saul and most of his sons died in battle with the Philistines, David was hailed as King of Israel. He captured the Jebusite city on Mount Zion, named it Jerusalem, and made it his capital. Truly, his cup overflowed.

His cup overflowed.

None of that made his an easy or painless life. Shepherding is uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous. As a rebel leader, David had no permanent home, plus the continual risk of being trapped by the superior forces of King Saul. After coming to the pinnacle of success, David still faced hardship. At least two of his sons rebelled against him. Nor was his close relationship with God a secure guard against sin. David heard the judgement of God in prophets' stern voices more than once in his life.

And yet, his cup overflowed.

Elizabeth Webb writes at Working Preacher, "Assurance of God's presence and care does not erase evil and suffering. Nowhere in the Psalms do we find a naïve trust, but always one that is fully aware of what has been lost. Divine deliverance does not mean that evil is eradicated. Indeed, it is still in the presence of enemies that the psalmist sits down at God's table. There is no suggestion here that enemies have become friends.

"But Psalm 23 insists that we can trust in deliverance in the midst of evil; the deliverance is true, it's real. Whatever preys upon us, individually and as communities, we are not defeated, because God is with us."

This ancient song of assurance – it's likely that the word we're used to hearing as "comfort" should probably be translated as "assure" ("your rod and your staff – they assure me") – does not ignore the real stresses of the real world. Good grazing isn't everywhere; the shepherd has to guide the sheep to it. Good water isn't everywhere; the shepherd has to guide the sheep to it, too. The dangers are real. Dark valleys hold predators, making them both literal and figurative valleys of the shadow of death. Guidance and protection are the things you need when the risks are real. Nobody needs them when everything is fine.

That's why we read this song at funerals.

It's why we read it today.

You don't need me to tell you about the stresses we're under. Despite the frequent use of the word, "unprecedented," there have been times like these before, and they've been horrible. One commentator I saw recently – I wish I could remember who it was – wondered if some of the shallow exuberance we associate with the "Roaring Twenties" was a reaction to the horror of World War I and the influenza pandemic of 1918.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 500 million people, one third of the world's population, were infected by that influenza virus. Of those, a tenth died: 50 million people. In the United States, the pandemic had three waves. The second was the worst.

It's one of the stressors for us today. We won't know when this pandemic is over. Caution must be our watchword for some time.

And our cup overflows.

In our hardship, we have the presence and support of God. Some of it is coming through the love of friends and family who are checking in on us, making sure we're doing okay, not rattling around too much in our homes alone. Some of it is coming through the support systems that people have created to assist one another. The crisis is exposing the weaknesses and limits of those systems – and also exposing the perils of dismantling those systems in the absence of a crisis – but they are there.

Some of the presence and support of God takes the form of the beautiful things we see and hear and taste and touch and smell, the things that revive us and help us appreciate the day. And some comes in the oh-so-difficult-to-describe movement of the Holy Spirit within us. It reinforces those things that refresh us. It guides the human expressions of love and aid. It holds our spirits when our anxiety or our exhaustion threatens to drag us down.

That's why we turn to this psalm, to remind ourselves once more that our cup overflows.

We will come shortly to the communion table, laid upon the tables of our many homes. We won't be eating in the presence of enemies, I hope, but we do take this meal surrounded by real risks and real stresses. We also take this meal in the real abundance of God's love, represented by an overflowing cup. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me, shall follow us, all the days of our life. Let us keep our hearts in the house of the LORD forever.

Amen.