

"Sustained"  
Phil 4:4-9 and Psalm 23  
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As you know well by now,

We have arrived at the last of our global Mission Sundays  
and the theme as you can see from your bulletin is "sustainable living"

When the Peace, Justice, Global Mission team

chose "sustainable living" as one of the themes for this month,  
it was because all the global ministries we support as a church  
partner with people toward sustainable living in various ways.

Sometimes sustainable living means overcoming hunger,  
thus the food security programs begun in Malawi.

Sometimes it means access to mental or physical health care,  
so that people can work and maintain relationships,  
as our ministry partners in Bangladesh and Guatemala  
assist people to do in a variety of ways.

The word "sustained" implies help from beyond the self and  
along with "Shepherd," "Sustainer" is often used as a name for God in liturgy,  
most often as a name for the Holy Spirit.

John Calvin used the phrase

"Father, Son and Holy Spirit" for the Trinity,  
but he also used "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer."<sup>i</sup>

Help from beyond oneself can make all the difference,  
setting life on a secure course  
and letting children get the start they need  
to build sustainable lives of their own.

But many do not welcome the idea of a Shepherd or Sustainer.

"I'm not a God person," said the 92-year-old woman  
at the end of the interview.

It had been videotaped in her comfortable home  
in French with English subtitles.

The video appeared last week in the New York Times.  
and by the end of the week was on the most popular list,  
for obvious reasons.

In 1942, she explained, she was living in Belgium  
when she, her young husband, and her middle-aged father  
were interned by the Nazis.

One day they were crowded into a cattle car  
to be shipped to a camp called Auschwitz in Germany,  
where they were certain they would die.

They had agreed ahead of time to jump  
from the small window of the moving train

before it reached the Polish border.  
But right before they were loaded onto the train,  
the father fell critically ill.  
He lay in the floor of the car in a stupor,  
his head in his daughter's lap as she wept.  
Her husband told her they would be separated  
as soon as they reached the camp anyway.  
If they did not jump soon, he urged, while still in Belgium, he urged,  
they would lose their chance at life.  
Still she resisted, unable to abandon her father. Then she rose all at once  
and flung herself up and through the window,  
putting out her arms for protection as she leapt from the train.  
Her husband came soon after,  
and they reunited along the track.  
Belgian citizens hid them for the rest of the war.

Move ahead now twenty years, to 1962. Husband and wife  
were on a trip to Israel when a woman approached  
from behind them saying the wife's name.  
"You don't recognize me but I recognize you," said the woman.  
"You were with your father on the train," she said. "I was there.  
After you jumped your father awoke and called and called for you.  
We told him you had jumped.  
'When you see my daughter,' he said very clearly,  
'Tell her I am so glad she jumped.  
She has made me the happiest father in the world."  
Before the train reached Germany, he died.

The daughter was astonished.  
"I felt such a weight lift from me, the weight of having abandoned him,"  
she told the interviewer, adding how grateful she was  
he had not died in the camp.  
Then, at the very end of the interview,  
out of context and out of the blue, she said, not once but twice:  
"I am not a God person. That's a story for another day.  
I am not a God person. Are you?"

Perhaps she said it because over the years  
some who heard her story saw the sustaining hand of God  
in that chance meeting on a street in Israel.  
She did not, but because of her denial  
God was in the room anyway,  
as the last seconds of video wound by.  
The decision to jump had indeed saved them,  
and they had been sustained for 75 years.

Here is another quote for you:

“We don’t go to church,” or “I’m not religious.”

It might be said by the adult relative of a man or woman  
from any of the four congregations I have served over the years.  
It comes while the relatives and I are talking about the service  
for mom or dad or aunt Beth or cousin Joe,  
and I have just asked if there are any scriptures  
they might find comforting read in the service.

“Not really. We don’t go to church,” the answer comes,  
Often mom or dad or aunt Beth or cousin Joe have left instructions,  
but if not, I hand out a sheet of scriptures for them to think about.

And there it is on the list, Psalm 23, a song of sustenance.  
“That would be nice,” the relative often says. “Let’s use that,”  
relieved to recognize something,  
or perhaps out of memory of another funeral,  
or even because it seems the least demanding,  
least embarrassing scripture on the page.

Psalm 23 is read at funerals and memorial services  
no doubt because of the poetry about walking  
through the valley of the shadow of death.

These words are deeply comforting for us when  
we find ourselves in our own version of that dreaded valley.  
Yet the irony is that the psalm brims from start to finish  
with images of life, and not just life,  
but a sheltered life so secure  
you can sit down in peace to a six-course meal  
in the face of your enemies or your deepest fears.

The Psalm asserts that life in faith is a gift we receive,  
That our life begins and ends in God,  
in God’s good intent and utter reliability,  
says theologian Walter Brueggemann.

“Our role is to receive, accept, trust, and respond.”<sup>ii</sup>  
That’s why the image of a shepherd and sheep works well.  
The shepherd is always primary, the sheep dependent.

The psalm opens with a statement of this relationship,  
a relationship of complete intimacy and trust.

The shepherd does for the sheep what it cannot do for itself.  
The shepherd is alert, always planning,  
looking ahead, making provision.

There is always abundant grass, refreshing water,  
safe paths on which to walk and from which to graze.  
The sheep lives a good, full life only because of the shepherd,  
who makes possible a life we cannot find for ourselves.  
The outcome is that the sheep lack nothing.

Even so, into the idyllic scene comes suffering.

There are dangers in life, unsafe paths, threatening places, enemies.

This moment of threat is also the moment

when the narration changes

and the sheep addresses the shepherd directly, saying,

“I know you will not leave me.”

The sheep, writes Brueggemann is realistic about danger,

but even more realistic about the shepherd.

I don't know why the woman in the video is “not a God person,”

My guess is that cruel experience has convinced her

there can't be any power watching over life,

much less a power armed with nothing

but a rod to fend off danger and staff to use for guiding.

So how right that the psalm does not say “no harm will come,”

or that predators are not roaming the landscape of life,

only that when the suffering *does* come

the flock will never be deserted,

never be abandoned to face the danger alone.

The images shift again from pastureland

to a table set for us by the Shepherd/ King.

Again, there is no fear here,

even though enemies are present.

A royal feast is not named, but it's implied

in the oil for anointing and the overflowing cup of wine,

overflowing not simply with wine but with gratitude.

So much gratitude that the poet bursts into a declaration of praise

with the words that always make me smile most

when sitting with people who pick this psalm as a “safe bet”,

and how can you blame them given the translation

we know best.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,”

goes the ending in English,

“and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

It sounds for all the world like a nice, simple close,

like the promise of pleasant outcomes,

but it is so much more than that.

For one thing, here as at the beginning,

the name of God is given,

which is purposefully unpronounceable in Hebrew,

four consonants that can't be voiced with no vowels.

We Christians use the term Yahweh when the name of names appears.

In our bibles it is written in all caps as L. O. R. D.—Lord.

Thus the psalm is framed start and finish with God's holiest name,

“Yahweh is my shepherd...may I dwell in Yahweh’s house forever.”  
But a faith in which the name above all names may never be spoken  
is naturally filled with other names for God  
such as Shepherd and Sustainer.

Two more names appear here: Goodness and Mercy.

They, too, are names; think of them as Capitalized,  
as Godself following you all the days of your life.

Then hear that “following” is a terribly pale and tepid translation  
for what would better be translated “pursue” or “chase after.”

The Shepherd who is God is not walking placidly behind us, staff in hand,  
but is in active pursuit of us, willing and wanting  
to sustain us in fulness of life.

This is what makes me smile with people  
who pick this psalm as a safe way to honor  
mom or dad or aunt Beth or cousin Joe.

This is what made we smile when out of the blue  
the 92-year-old daughter announced that she is not a God person.

I honor her choice to see things that way, I do,  
but along with her choice is the Shepherd’s choice  
to be in loving pursuit, seeking to thrust  
an overflowing cup into our hands  
all the days of our lives. AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> I learned this in a lecture in seminary, and have used the phrase in a doxology to the tune Calvin purported wrote for the hymn *I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art*, but I do not know the reference in his writings.

<sup>ii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching, Year A*, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 285.