

**WANTING**  
*Sermon for Easter 4A-Ps 23*  
LPC, 5/5/17

On gift-giving occasions, the honoree sometimes gets asked what he or she wants: “What do you want for your birthday?” Or “What do you want for Christmas?” This week, some mothers will undoubtedly be asked, “What do you want for Mothers’ Day?”

Want in this sense, in the sense of desiring something, has become the dominant meaning in twenty-first-century American English usage. But this was not always the case.

How many of you were made to memorize the twenty-third psalm in childhood? If you were, you probably memorized the King James Version, as I was. This version begins, as few of us will forget, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want...” This version can still be found in our Prayer Book, on page 476, if you want to look for it, within the context of the order for Burial Rite I.

“Want” in this sense has little to do with desire, and more to do with needing, or lacking. If you look above the King James Version on page 476 of the Prayer Book, you will see the phrase rendered as “Therefore can I lack nothing.” This, apparently, is the sense of the original Hebrew, and the sense intended by the King James translators. In the early 1600’s, when the King James Version was produced, the dominant sense of “wanting” was still that of lack or need.

We see this usage in ancient adages like “For want of a nail, the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe the horse was lost...” Personally, I remember first encountering this usage when reading *Alice in Wonderland*, where the Mad Hatter tells Alice, “Your hair wants cutting.” Perhaps the most chilling popular example of this usage is the story of the profligate King Belshazzar of Babylon who in the Book of Daniel received the mysterious message, “You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting.” In this context “wanting” clearly means “deficient.” Sure enough, as the story goes on, Belshazzar is killed that very night, presumably by heavenly intervention.

The assurance of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is that with the Lord as our Shepherd we shall not be deficient, we shall not be in want, we shall lack nothing. As the Psalm continues, different examples of the Lord’s provision of need are listed.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.” In other words the Lord provides a safe place to sleep and abundant food and water for his sheep. “He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness.” The Lord provides not only sustenance for life, but encouragement and guidance, things that support quality of life. We are moving up Maslow’s scale of need from sustenance and safety to a place of belonging and relationship.

Abruptly then, the psalmist turns from provision for every human need to what happens when things go wrong. In a brilliant economy of words, the psalmist describes this eventuality as “the valley of the shadow of death.” We all know this valley, don’t we? By not specifying his own circumstances, the psalmist universalizes and creates a shorthand for those horrible times

when human beings feel abandoned by everything good. But even here the psalmist fears no evil and perceives the accompaniment of God. He refers to the comfort of the Shepherd's rod and staff. This is interesting because the Shepherd's rod is an instrument of discipline and his staff an instrument of rescue. The comfort of the Shepherd's presence is known in discipline and rescue.

The Lord's provision continues even in the presence of troublemakers. The anointing with oil connotes healing and being chosen. The overflowing cup of course symbolizes abundance. The psalmist concludes with renewed confidence in God's goodness and mercy, and his expectation of God's nearness always.

If there is a more complete and concise description of God's care and provision, I don't know of it. The whole poem is a song about lacking nothing.

Do note, however, that all of this provision, abundance, goodness and mercy hangs on the very first line: "The Lord is my Shepherd." All of this assurance, protection and guidance follow from following the Lord. This is what happens when the Lord is our Shepherd, when we follow the one who calls us by name. All these great things are not guaranteed when we wander about on our own, following our own lesser desires.

This brings us back to that other, more familiar meaning of the word "want:" "want" in the sense of desiring to have. There is a legitimate place for this kind of wanting in the Christian life. As a matter of fact, true growth in the Christian life may have its necessary beginning in this kind of wanting.

Most of us, even without using the words "God" or "Jesus," are first aware of a deep longing within ourselves for meaning and love. We look around our world and see all the places where goodness and mercy are lacking, and we long for goodness and mercy. Want in this sense, longing for goodness and mercy and meaning and love, is the beginning of faith: the beginning of desiring Jesus as our shepherd.

St. Theresa of Avila, living in the 1500's, wrote, "O God, I do not love you. I do not want to love you. But how I want to want to love you." The saint eloquently expresses the deep longing that exists within the human soul for goodness and mercy even before faith in God is born, long before love for God is known. When our faith and our love are lacking, our truest and deepest longing will lead us to God.

In the spirit of wanting God, in whose sheepfold we want for nothing, let us pray together the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm from page 476 of the Prayer Book, or if you have it, from memory:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;  
For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;  
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.  
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.