

Easter 4

“The King of Love My Shepherd Is” (*Lutheran Service Book* #709)

What words do you turn to when you look for comfort in the worst moments of life? What hymns sing those words? It is no secret that the words to Psalm 23 are the go to text for people looking for comfort. There is a no more beloved and beautiful setting of those words than Henry W. Baker’s hymn “The King of Love My Shepherd Is”, first published in 1861. It has been sung at the funerals of commoners and princesses (e.g. Princess Diana in 1997). Why is it so popular?

Hymns are marriages of text and tune and, when done well, they become a united expression of the Biblical Word and the voice of faith. That is truly the case here. In text and music we sing the blessed words that generations have turned to for comfort, encouragement, and hope.

In the first stanza, the initial verse of the psalm, the Shepherd is given a name—the King of Love. The goodness and grace of this loving King never fail us. Where our intentions and works fail miserably, the Word and the promise of the Lord endure forever. Echoing the words of Paul to the Romans—“If God is for us, who can be against us” (8:31b)—the hymn reminds us that our confidence lies not in our good works but in the favor of our good and gracious Lord.

With more than a simple paraphrase of the text, Baker amplifies the Biblical image. The quiet waters are filled with His life. The ransomed souls of the baptized children of God are given new birth in this living water and led to the rich pastures of His means of grace (the celestial food being a reference to the heavenly meal of Christ’s body and blood in the Holy Eucharist).

The third stanza became the final words of its author. Here is the core of the Gospel. In foolish rebellion our first parents exchanged the grace of God for an empty moment that hid only death. Yet we have a loving and gentle Good Shepherd who seeks His lost sheep, leaving even the ninety-nine to seek out and restore the one (Luke 15). The familiar stained glass image of Jesus the Good Shepherd carrying the lamb in His arms is here sung with the joyful voices of the lost restored to their eternal home.

In death the only comfort we can know is the presence of Him who died with us and for us but who lives now to lead and guide us to everlasting life. The cross is the staff of the Good Shepherd. The journey to eternity leads us to the Lord’s table, to the healing grace that overflows our cup and fills us with joy even in the midst of sorrow.

The Lord speaks; we listen. And then we respond. For the eternity of the never failing goodness of the Lord we will sing and pray and praise our Good Shepherd—first within the house of the Lord in worship, and then in the eternal dwelling place of God in heaven.

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The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His and He is mine forever.
Where streams of living water flow, my ransomed soul He leadeth
And, where the verdant pastures grow, with food celestial feedeth.

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed, but yet in love He sought me
And on His shoulder gently laid and home rejoicing brought me.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill with Thee, dear Lord, beside me
Thy rod and staff my comfort still, Thy cross before to guide me.

Thou spreadst a table in my sight; Thine unction grace bestoweth;
And, oh, what transport of delight from Thy pure chalice floweth!

And so through all the length of days Thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing Thy praise within Thy house forever!

Text: *Lutheran Service Book* #709. Henry W. Baker (1821-77). The text is in the public domain.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded and printed for local use.]