

Dear Friends,

For most the effects of a Covid-19 infection are not too serious. For a few however it is severe. They struggle to breathe. They need one of the precious ventilators to help them until their lungs recover. They may come to feel like a person who almost stopped breathing but was then revived and brought back to life. That experience connects them with a line from one of the most famous poems in the world. A poem so old that you wonder if it can possibly have anything to say to us today.

The poem is Psalm 23, "The Lord's my shepherd." It is one of the set readings for this coming Sunday. When I read it, I was astonished that at such a moment we should be given a passage where someone describes their struggle to breathe. The well-known translation is "He restores my soul." But the Hebrew word *nefesh* does not mean "soul" it means "life breath." The picture is of someone who has almost stopped breathing but has been brought back to life.\* It is bitterly sad and painful that some will not be revived, their life breath will not be restored.

Perhaps those who are dying and those who suffer with them may find something in another part of the passage. It's when the writer turns from talking *about* God to talking *to* God. The Psalm begins with a list of things that God does, "*he* makes me lie down," "*he* leads me" and so on. But a moment comes when the writer needs God in a personal way. They turn from talking *about* God to talking *to* God. God is no longer just *he*, God becomes *you*. That just happens to take place when things are at their most challenging and maybe even frightening. It says, "Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow, I fear no harm, for *you* are with me."

For the Psalmist, it's in the darkest moment that God becomes most real and personal. Some of you will be quick to say that it's not always like that. But maybe those who feel abandoned come very near to God. Soon we will be remembering the human being who is close to the Father's heart, who yet felt forsaken when he walked through the vale of death's shadow. The story goes that in that man God somehow shared our experiences. Perhaps in our suffering, we may after all reach out and say to God "You are with me."

God bless you,

Tony

\*Thank you to Robert Alter for pointing this out in his translation and commentary *The Hebrew Bible*.