



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Sermon preached by Rev. Sharon Gracen

October 24, 2010

## Divine Poetry

I love poetry. There is a small but fine collection in my office, from A.A. Milne and other children's verse to Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot. I am particularly fond of some writers who may be unknown to you like Rumi, a Persian mystic from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and Rabindranath Tagore, a more contemporary voice from India – one of his poems was read at Peter's and my wedding. Poetry, with its rhythm, nuance and interplay of sounds and ideas has the capacity to communicate meaning beyond meaning.

Poems come in all shapes and sizes – from the briefest – which my research says belongs to Shel Silverstein – “Fleas. Adam had'em.” Through the elegant brevity of Carl Sandberg.

The fog comes  
on little cat feet.

It sits looking  
over harbor and city  
on silent haunches  
and then moves on.

And all the way to the grand epics, Whitman's *Song of Myself*, Homer's *Iliad* and the longest of them all, the national poem of Mongolia *The Epic of Jangar*. If translated into English, it would be 400,000 lines long. I may not get around to that one!

There is poetry throughout the Bible, in the telling of creation's story, the love songs of the Song of Songs, and the poetic thundering of the prophets. But no where is poetry more present and accessible than in the Psalms. They have been the prayer language for two religions for more than three thousand of years. We pray from the psalms every week, in recitation and song.

The Book of Psalms is not really a book, but an anthology amassed over centuries, some probably actually written by David himself, others by anonymous poets. There are seven different genres of psalms and they provide the vocabulary for our hearts' most profound emotions, joy, despair, gratitude, wonder, and awe. There are hymns of praise – “Praise the Lord, O my soul; and forget not all his benefits.” “The Lord is King; let the earth rejoice;” “Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.”

And then there are the laments, the voice of a people crying. “I cry to the Lord with my voice; to the Lord I make loud supplication.” And the most poignant, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Then there is the voice of the exiles, “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept; when we remembered you, O Zion.” Laments are a powerful pastoral tool for those who are grieving or in any kind of trouble.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

[www.trinitybranford.org](http://www.trinitybranford.org) • 203-488-2681 • e-mail [rector47@trinitybranford.org](mailto:rector47@trinitybranford.org)



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Psalms of thanksgiving are studies in intentional gratitude. "I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I will sing your praise." There are also psalms of confidence, "My soul alone in silence waits; from him comes my salvation." And of course "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." This and more variety makes up the 150 psalms. The shortest psalm, #134 is two verses. Psalm 119 is 150 verses divided into 22 sections; one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

On Wednesday at our Healing Eucharist, we prayed Ps.139, paying particular attention to something called parallelism. This is a poetic technique that refers to correspondence between two poetic phrases. It can take many forms but it is often helpful to hear it in a psalm as one phrase, usually the one after the asterisk, serving to reinforce or explain and expand on the one before. Sometimes it appears that lines merely repeat ideas but in the wisdom of the psalmist, it is always for a purpose. Let's look at this in our shortest psalm. The first verse is "Behold now, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord;\* you that stand by night in the house of the Lord." You can hear how being a servant of the Lord is then described, characterized as those who stand by night in the house of the Lord. In that we can hear the faithfulness and commitment, the watchful, unceasing attention to being present with God. Together these phrases inform each other. Listen to the opening verse of everyone's favorite; "The Lord is my shepherd,\* I shall not want. The relationship described in this verse alone is an encyclopedia of faith. God is the one who watches over us, protects us, and stays awake through cold, dark nights, listening for the wolf that would threaten us. And what does that mean for us? Everything. For to be without want is to know God's abundance and to recognize the presence of God in every small corner of our lives and to know that it is sufficient. All of that in "The Lord is my shepherd;\* I shall not want."

My preaching professor always taught that a sermon needed to be about the good news. Psalms in themselves are good news even when they are cries of despair because they never allow us to turn from God. Today's psalm, the first six verses of psalm 84 is a study in good news. I can imagine Jesus finding strength and purpose in these verses as he tried to cure humanity's blindness. Let's wade in to this poetry.

"How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts!\*My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God." This verse first brings up a question, what is God's dwelling, it seems to be simultaneously something yet unattained and for which one longs. But it may also be the very heart and flesh that rejoices in the God. How extraordinary to know ourselves as the dwelling place of the Lord of Hosts.

"The sparrow has found her a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young;\* by the side of your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.