

Dare we relate to God as a personal friend? God's waiting.

Choral music must be a complex thing to the lay person – just the scramble of notes, especially if it's polyphonic. You wonder how a conductor can hold it all together to result in something powerful, beautiful, majestic. I think of the Sistine Choir in Rome, hundreds of years old, quite traditional in its repertory and of the 350 member Mormon Tabernacle Choir! It takes the whole attention of conductors and choristers to come through technically correct – proclaiming sound worthy of the doctrine they translate into music. It would seem hard for any individual among the singers to get *personally* into the score and lyrics. It's a group thing.

But among the 150 Psalms of the Hebrew Bible, royal psalms sung at coronations, psalms of praise, thanksgiving, lamentations, every once in awhile one psalm emerges quietly, personal in quality – as if the composer really felt a closeness, an intimacy with God that permeates the lyrics with absolute confidence. Like Psalm 23, which we sing today:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack for nothing, / He makes me lie down in meadows green, / He leads me to refreshing streams, / He revives life in me. // He guides me by true paths, / As he himself is true, / My road may run through a glen of gloom (in dark ravines). But I will fear no harm. // For thou art always with me, nay / Thou wilt protect me, Lord, / Thy shepherd's club, thy strong staff - / They are my firm comfort. // You set a table before me . . . / You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows . . .

It seems hardly fit for a choir's rendition; it's made for a solo, soft voice of someone who is not afraid of God, but senses God to be so close, a formidable friend. There are others like this, like Psalm 73:

As long as my heart was bitter and pain pierced my side / I was a dull, stupid creature, no better than a brute before thee. // Yet I am always beside thee, thou holdest me by my right hand . . . // Whom have I in heaven but thee? On earth I care for nothing else. / My body and my soul may fail, but God is my portion for evermore.

There are more like that, like Psalm 121 where we find:
Never will he let thee slip, thy keeper never sleeps, / Behold the keeper of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps . . . / May he protect thy going out and coming in from now and forever more.

Such a more personal, intimate approach to God seems also to emerge in some modern poets – once we are past the classical, somewhat operatic style of the Shelley's and Byron's of our classroom experience. And, of course, I think of Emily Dickinson who wrote a poem about God that's not only personal but playfully so – miming in my opinion Psalm 23's thought about God's setting a table for the Psalmist. Her poem is called: "God gave a loaf to every bird". It goes:

God gave a loaf to every bird, / But just a crumb to me; / I dare not eat it, though I starve, - / My poignant luxury / To own it, touch it, prove the feat / That made the pellet mine, - / Too happy in my sparrow chance / For ampler coveting. // It might be famine all around, / I could not miss an ear, / Such plenty smiles upon my board, / My garner shows so fair. / I wonder how the rich may feel - / An Indiaman--an Earl? / I deem that I with but a crumb / Am sovereign of them all.