St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
Good Shepherd Sunday, 2026

This is the time of year in my Music History class when we arrive at the music of Handel, and it's wonderful to see how students respond to him. He's always instantly popular, and while they love his tunefulness, what they really seem to love is his *audacity*. And I always understand why, because his music was audacious and because, frankly, *he* was audacious. This was the guy, after all, who was born in Germany as Georg Frideric before changing his name both to the Italian Giorgio Federico to ultimately the English George Frederick as he moved about Europe building a career. When asked why he kept shifting identity, he famously said, "You go to Italy to learn; you go to London to earn," That's audacious. And of course he equally famously wrote music for none other than the King, requiring 50 instrumentalists and a barge so the music could be played all night on the River Thames. His follow-up was written for 100 and so many wanted to hear it London traffic was tied up for four hours. That's audacious!

But really, most audacious is the music itself, a breakthrough in its time, particularly his music for the human voice. His operas told stories of heroes from the past. One of them was Xerxes, a Persian king who amassed great power and invaded Greece. And the way the opera starts is quite audacious. Xerxes, the king, walks on stage and sings a beautiful song. . .to a tree. [play the aria]

Music of such utter simplicity and tender, gentle beauty. The king singing to a tree. It was not a success in its time. Today, however, it's much loved and seen as a perfect illustration of perhaps Handel's greatest gift: his insight, the humanity of his writing, the "soul" if you will in his music, his ability to see inside who we are as humans and somehow to capture that in music. And so, as we've just heard, the king, exhausted by palace intrigue, battle weary, fearful, under relentless pressure, finds just one sweet moment of respose, of rest under the shade of a simple ordinary tree, and he sings to it and he thanks it for providing such glorious shade. And we all get it. Because it's true- it's the one thing we can count on when everything else is beating down on us.

This is Handel 300 years ago offering this kind of insight, connecting in this way to us, to the human experience, the human soul. And today we also behold the psalmist, author of the words that stand at the very center of our liturgy, *3000* years ago, also connecting to us to the very essence of our experience as humans, with words of such tender beauty and insight that most of us came here today knowing them, ready to recite them from memory. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*, the psalmist writes, and if we're to follow tradition and ascribe these words to David, the king, the warrior, the poet and musician, we can only wonder what led him to create words of such comfort and strength and like Handel of such soul and insight. Though I walk through the darkest valley, he wrote, you are there. You are with me. You comfort me.

Just what was this darkest of valleys for another king, for this young leader who brought such flourishing and peace and unity to his people? We don't know. Maybe he wrote it while on the run from Saul, once his mentor and greatest champion, now jealous and threatened. Maybe he wrote it while bewildered by bitterness of his son Absolom, the charismatic one who won the people's support and nearly overthrew him. We know David was inconsolate when his son failed

and was killed- was it the darkness of grief that David wrote these words? "O my son Absalom!" are the words we know he uttered: "My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you —O Absalom, my son, my son!" Was this what he called here so memorably *the valley of the shadow*? Or might it have been another moment — the moment of confrontation for David with Nathan, the wise one whose bracing rebuke forced David to face up to his own moral failures?
We don't know. We just know that the king wrote words that have resonated for 3000 years, that cut right to the heart of what it means to be human, that speak an indelible word of truth. This is what the psalms do. They capture the heartbeat and the fullness of what it means to be alive, to share this experience, all of its joys, its incredible joys, all of its sorrows, all of it. The psalms are the only scripture addressed *to* God. In them the soul is laid bare. *Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord. I sought God and he answered me. He delivered me from my fear. I lift my eyes to the hills. From where is my help to come?*

The mystics have always celebrated the psalms. Athanasius called them "a mirror of the soul of everyone who sings them; there is nothing more glorious." Martin Luther called them "the entire bible in miniature." Dorothy Day's "daily strength," as she put it, could be found in two things only: "coffee and the psalms." For Tom Wright, the psalms "express all that we are ever likely to feel and they lay it, raw and open, in the presence of God. They should be said, sung, chanted, whispered, learned by heart, and shouted from the rooftops." The psalms are poems; they are prayers and hymns. They express lament, longing and fear alongside hope, confidence, joy and ecstatic praise. They are communal and they are personal. They are artfully composed while they are also not artful at all; they're honest and often quite raw. The psalms have no trouble naming what they're all about: they talk right to God, openly and directly. You lead me. You restore me. You set a table for me. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessing and grace and love.

And so yes words from 300 years ago and 3000 years ago take us to the heart of what it means to be human, music and words break open and reveal the soul and speak, just as do, finally, those uttered 2000 years ago that we heard just a moment ago of and from the God who came and lived among us that he might be known by us and that he might know us. Words from John's gospel of the God who came to give this rare and precious gift- the gift of *being known*, all of us, in our entirety, the good and the bad, all hearts open, all desires known, no secrets hid, every little bit of us; the gift of being known by the God who came in love to walk with us and finally to walk us each home. And it's none other of course than that same one, true, eternal God to whom the king in the darkest of dark places could open his heart wide and say, "You are my shepherd. I need nothing more. Even in the darkness, your goodness and mercy fill me every day of my life, and I find my home in you forever."