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Word of the day:

PASTURE

“The Lord is my shepherd,” says David in the sweetest of his psalms, “I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green PASTURES.” Not many of us these days will ever do that. I never have. I’ve never said, “These sheep of mine might like those peaceful green fields over there,” where the clover is thick, and the shoots are dark and rich with moisture and the thick sugars and starches that are the wondrous gift of the sunlight.

I can’t imagine any Greek warrior looking upon Zeus as his own shepherd, to make him lie down anywhere, let alone the green fields. Zeus was to be honored, feared, celebrated for his strength and cunning, and bargained with by the right sacrifices, but not loved. What would have been the point? If you ever thought of Zeus and love in the same moment, it was not you doing the loving, but Zeus, and it wasn’t love but lust, after every beautiful creature that walked on two legs.

But David, most glorious of the kings of Israel, calls the Lord his shepherd, and imagines that the Lord has taken thought for him, leading him not just anywhere, but to the special place, to the green

place, beside the still waters. In a land like Israel, drought and desert are never far away, so that if the Lord did not care, the sheep might go hungry, browsing all day long just to keep the gnaw of hunger down, but not really feeding well. Maybe we should read the line this way: “The LORD is my shepherd,” and nobody else. The mighty Hebrew language allows for it: *Adonai ro’i* – that’s all the

sentence says. On one side, there’s the holy name of God which you may not utter, so you replace it with *Adonai*, the Lord, and on the other side, *ro’i*, shepherd-mine (say it this way: RO-EE, with a break in the middle). You can’t say it any plainer than that.

If David were a Romantic poet, we’d

have a shepherdess or two, and some pleasant hillbillies weaving baskets, but he isn’t. So from that lovely scene we move through the “valley of the shadow of death,” which is what the Hebrew literally says – not just some “dark valley” – and on to more food, in fact a feast, for “you spread a table for me,” and not just anywhere, but where it means the most, “in the sight of my enemies.” Naturally the Church encourages us to think here of Holy Communion, for God can spread a table in the wilderness, as he did for the children of Israel in the desert, and as He does at every Mass, in the



wilderness of the world and of our hearts. And who can tell how many of our unseen enemies grimace and scowl, prancing and hopping but powerless to do anything about it, as we partake of the Lord's own food, the true flesh and drink that is the Eucharist?

PASTURE is a good word for me, because it gives me a chance to help out any of my young readers who are studying Latin or Greek. There's something called Grimm's Law, named for Jacob Grimm, one of the famous Brothers who gave us the fairy tales of the

Germans, such as Cinderella, though in the original German they're often Grimmer than you will find them in picture books for children. Grimm's Law tells us a lot of things about consonants.

Our ancestors in language, thousands of years ago, lived under the open skies in the middle of what is now Russia. They were restless and intelligent and creative people, and they moved out of there in great waves, one after another, north and west and south. Some of them went down to India. Some went to Persia. Some went far north to Scandinavia. Some went south and west to Greece and Italy and Spain. Some went west but stayed in Germany. All of their languages are related to each other, as distant cousins. So the German tongues are related to the languages of Latin and Greek, because the people who spoke them were distantly related to each other, and their ancestors originally

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spoke the same languages, thousands of years before. That means that there will be family resemblances. Here is one, which Herr Grimm saw: when you see the consonant P in Latin or Greek, think of F in German or English.

Here you may fetch the smelling salts, in case Aunt Fiona has fainted.

It is exciting, really. Look at these few pairs: Latin PATER, English FATHER; Latin PISCIS, English FISH; Greek PTEROS (as in PTERODACTYL, the prehistoric bat-bird), English

FEATHER. So the Latin verb PASCERE means to FEED, and sure enough, the words are distant cousins. I used to think that Italian PASTA just meant FOOD, because what better thing to eat has man ever cooked, if not Italian noodles? It isn't so, unfortunately. That word has to do with squashing things and making a PASTE out of them. But our FOOD is related to the Italian ANTIPASTO, or at least the PASTO part of it. ANTIPASTO doesn't mean “opposed to PASTA,” or “before the PASTA,” but before the real FEEDING gets underway, PASTA or no.

Which makes me glad that David wasn't an Italian chef, or we might say, “The Lord sets me a fine spread of antipasto, and what could I ask for better than that?”



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