

Shepherd Me, O God

by Tom Wilkinson, Vice President, Development
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Marty Haugen is a contemporary liturgical composer, performing and recording artist, and author. He lives in Minnesota and is the composer-in-residence at Mayflower United Church of Christ in Minneapolis. His work appears in Roman Catholic and Protestant hymnals and songbooks, including the excellent *The Faith We Sing* supplement to *The United Methodist Hymnal*. I highly recommend it to your congregation.

Marty has written a new setting of Psalm 23. It's at number 2058 in *The Faith We Sing*. Here is the refrain:

*Shepherd me, O God,
Beyond my wants,
Beyond my fears,
From death into life.*

What does it mean to ask God to shepherd us beyond our *wants* and *fears*? And what has that got to do with stewardship?

First, there's a difference between our *wants* and our *needs*. The refrain is not a plea to God to shepherd us beyond our needs. Our needs – financial and otherwise – are real and essential. But as the corporate takeover artist Lawrence Garfinkle says in Jerry Sterner's 1989 off-Broadway play about mergers and acquisitions, *Other People's Money*, "I do it for the money. I don't need the money. I want the money. Shouldn't surprise you. Since when do needs and wants have anything to do with one another?"

So what does it mean to ask God to shepherd me beyond my wants? I think it's about setting priorities and practicing spiritual discipline. I may want a 50" plasma flat panel high definition television set. But do I need one? No, there's nothing wrong with the vintage 1992 TV I have now. Our culture has trained us to confuse needs and wants. But Jesus is very clear about making the distinction. He calls us to give our first fruits, our tithe, to further the kingdom of God. Jesus does not ask us to send in what we can after we've bought the new plasma TV, or leased the new BMW, or obtained whatever other bauble that's enchanted us.

*Shepherd me, O God,
Beyond my wants,
Beyond my fears,
From death into life.*

And then what can it possibly mean to ask God to shepherd us beyond our fears? What are we afraid of? The answer for many of us is that we're afraid about our finances. Many seniors fear that they will outlive their savings and other retirement benefits. Some parents of teenagers fear that they won't have enough money to send their kids to college. Other people may fear, even if it's just a subconscious dread, that they won't have enough money to measure up to whatever expectations they have constructed for themselves. But Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' Indeed your heavenly Father knows you need these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Again it's about priorities and spiritual discipline. I've never met a tither who was worried about his or her finances. Tithers have decided to practice stewardship as a spiritual discipline, and their financial priorities fall in line. God provides. Fear not. Want not.

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Beyond my wants,
Beyond my fears,
From death into life.*

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