

“Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt” BWV 112

1. Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt,  
Hält mich in seiner Hute,  
Darin<sup>1</sup> mir gar nichts mangeln wird  
Irgend an einem Gute,  
Er weidet mich ohn Unterlass,<sup>2</sup>  
Darauf wächst das wohlschmeckend Gras<sup>3</sup>  
Seines heilsamen Wortes.

2. Zum reinen Wasser er mich weist,  
Das mich erquicken tue,

1. The Lord is my faithful shepherd;  
[He] keeps me in his care,<sup>4</sup>  
In which I will lack absolutely naught  
Of any good thing at all;  
He unceasingly feeds me [his sheep]  
Where the luscious<sup>5</sup> grass  
Of his wholesome [eucharistic]<sup>6</sup> Word grows.

2. He directs me to the clean [baptismal]<sup>10</sup> water

GENERAL NOTE: This libretto is a hymn versification, generally attributed to Wolfgang Meuslin, of Luther’s biblical translation of Psalm 23. There are, however, a few scansion-affecting minor textual variants (see fn. 9 and fn. 17, below) that are apparently unique to Bach’s cantata setting.

<sup>1</sup>Some hymnbooks gave “darin” (“in/during which”; or, “where”) and others gave “darum” (“therefore”). The printed cantata-libretto booklets distributed to Bach’s congregants in 1731 give the latter, whereas Bach’s score and performing parts give the former.

<sup>2</sup>In the 1731 text booklet and some contemporary hymn books, this line reads “er läst mich weid’n ohn Unterlass” (“he lets me feed unceasingly”).

<sup>3</sup>“Darauf wächst das wohlschmeckend Gras” is given more intelligibly in some later eighteenth-century hymnbooks as “Da aufwächst das wohlschmeckend Gras” (“Where the luscious grass [see fn. 5, below] of his wholesome Word grows”).

<sup>4</sup>In older German, “die Hut” could mean “watch,” “protection,” “attention,” “herding,” “pasture,” “care.”

<sup>5</sup>In modern German, “wohlschmeckend” means “good-tasting,” but in older German it was sometimes used as a synonym for “wohlriechend” (“sweet-smelling”) when speaking of trees, wood, flowers, and the like. The English word “luscious” is able to capture both of those senses. In any event, the point it seems was not so much that the Lord provides his sheep with grass which tastes good as that he provides grass which is luxuriant in growth (hence its fragrance) and thus both plentiful and salubrious—it is outright hunger that the Lord wants to rescue his sheep from, not the unpleasantness of mediocre-tasting fare.

<sup>6</sup>This line apparently draws on Hebrews 6:5, which speaks of those who “geschmeckt haben das gütige Wort Gottes” (“have tasted the benevolent word of God”), a passage that Luther took to be referring to the sacrament of communion. John 1:14 states “Das Wort ward Fleisch und wohnete unter uns” (“The [eternal] Word [of God] became [the] flesh [of the body of Jesus] and dwelled [temporally] among us [humans here on earth]”), and Lutheran doctrine taught that Jesus, the Word made flesh, is also physically present “in, mit, und unter” (“in, with, and among/under”) the consecrated bread in the sacrament of communion. Line 1 of movement 2, as noted in fn. 10, below, apparently refers to baptism, which is the other of the two sacraments observed in Lutheranism.

<sup>10</sup>Luther’s biblical rendering of Psalm 23 here reads “führet mich zum frischen Wasser” (“leads me to fresh water” [i.e., “fresh water” in the sense of “cool (drinking) water” as opposed to “warm water”—not of “fresh water” as opposed to “salt water”]). The hymn poet has changed “frischen” to “reinen,” presumably to link lines 1–2 to Hebrews 10:22, which speaks of the followers of Jesus washing their bodies with “reinem Wasser” (“pure/clean water”), which was traditionally understood, including in Lutheran interpretation, as referring to the sacrament of baptism (see also fn. 6, above). The poet may also, however, have wished to avoid having his versification feature equivocal senses of the word “frisch” (see fn. 23, below).

**Das ist sein fron Heiliger Geist,<sup>7</sup>  
Der macht mich wohlgemute.  
Er führet mich auf rechter Strass  
Seiner Geboten ohn Ablass<sup>8</sup>  
Von wegen seines Namens willen.<sup>9</sup>**

**That would<sup>11</sup> give me new life,<sup>12</sup>  
That [water which] is his glorious<sup>13</sup> Holy Spirit<sup>14</sup>  
Who makes me be of good courage.<sup>15</sup>  
He [the Lord] endlessly<sup>16</sup> leads me on the right path  
Of his commandments,  
On account of his name's sake.**

**3. Und<sup>17</sup> ob ich wandelt im finstern Tal,**

**3. And though I should walk in the dark [perilous]<sup>19</sup> valley,**

<sup>7</sup>The 1731 text booklet and modern editions of the cantata give the end of this line as “fro[h]nheiliger Geist,” an uncommon expression which in earlier centuries could have meant “sacrosanct [i.e., ‘sacred-holy,’ which is the definition given at the entry ‘frohneilig’ in the leading German historical dictionary] spirit” but which was evidently understood in Bach’s day as “glorious Holy Spirit.” The reading in Bach’s own score and performing part, “frohneilig Heiliger Geist” (“glorious Holy Spirit”), unambiguously projects the latter meaning. The hymnbooks printed the expression in this stanza as either “frohneilig Heiliger Geist,” “frohneilig Heiliger Geist,” “Frohneilig Heiliger Geist,” “Frohneilig Heiliger Geist,” “frohneilig Heiliger Geist,” or “frohneilig Heiliger Geist.” See also fn. 13, below.

<sup>8</sup>In the 1731 text booklet and some contemporary hymn books, these lines read “Er führet mich auf rechter Strass in sein Gebotn ohn Unterlass” (“He leads me, in his commandments, unceasingly on the right path”).

<sup>9</sup>In the 1731 text booklet and the contemporary hymn books this line reads simply “Von wegen seines Namens” (“On account of his name”). All the other stanzas of the hymn close with a seven-syllable line, but in Bach’s (aria) setting of this stanza, the poetry has a nine-syllable line, one that draws differently on the wording of Luther’s biblical translation of Psalm 23, which here reads “[Er führet mich auf rechter Strasse] um seines Namens willen” (“[He leads me on the right path] for the sake of his name”). The simplest explanation for the extended line is that Bach himself added the biblical word to the hymn text (see also fn. 17, below).

<sup>11</sup>The use of the subjunctive here is logically a bit awkward, and it is thus worth noting that the older hymnals sometimes give the indicative “tute.”

<sup>12</sup>“Erquickten” often meant “to refresh” or “to restore,” but it was also used in the sense of “neues Leben zu erteilen” (“to give new life”).

<sup>13</sup>“Fron” or “frohneilig” is an archaic adjective with a variety of meanings, used here in its sense of “herrlich, prächtig, schön” (“glorious, magnificent, beautiful”). See also fn. 7, above. Modern hymnals change the line to “Das ist sein werter Heiliger Geist” (“That is his treasured Holy Spirit”).

<sup>14</sup>The sense of this line is derived from John 7:38-39 (a passage whose renderings have been much contested in the history of biblical translation), where Jesus (who is called a “shepherd” in John 10) associates “Ströme des lebendigen Wassers” (“streams of living [i.e., ever-flowing] water”) with “der Heilige Geist” (“the Holy Spirit”).

<sup>15</sup>In modern German, “wohlgemut” means “cheerful,” but in older German it could also be used as a synonym for “unverzagt” (“undaunted,” “high-couraged”). The latter sense fits better with the sentiments of Psalm 23.

<sup>16</sup>“Ohn Ablass” here does not mean “without indulgence” (i.e., “indulgence” in its religious technical sense, associated with Roman Catholicism, as “a pardon of sins”). “Ohn Ablass” here is simply an older-German alternative expression for “ohn Unterlass” (“without ceasing”).

<sup>17</sup>The word “und” (“and”) does not appear in the 1731 text booklet or the contemporary hymn books; it was added here from Luther’s biblical translation of Psalm 23. The simplest explanation is that Bach himself inserted the biblical word into the hymn text (see also fn. 9, above).

<sup>19</sup>The underlying Hebrew of Psalm 23:4 is classically rendered in English as “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Luther, however, rendered the passage as “Und ob ich schon wanderte im finstern Tal,

**Fürcht ich kein Ungelücke  
In Verfolgung, Leiden, Trübsal  
Und dieser Welte Tücke,<sup>18</sup>  
Denn du bist bei mir stetiglich,  
Dein Stab und Stecken trösten mich,  
Auf dein Wort ich mich lasse.**

**4. Du bereitest für mir einen Tisch  
Für<sup>22</sup> mein Feinden allenthalben,  
Machst mein Herze unverzagt und frisch,  
Mein Haupt tust du mir salben  
Mit deinem Geist, der Freuden Öl,  
Und schenkest voll ein meiner Seel  
Deiner geistlichen Freuden.**

**5. Gutes und die Barmherzigkeit  
Folgen mir nach im Leben,  
Und ich werd bleiben allezeit**

**I will fear no calamity  
In persecution, suffering, tribulation,<sup>20</sup>  
And the malice of this world;  
For you [Lord] are abidingly with me;  
Your [shepherd's] staff and rod comfort me;  
In your word I put my trust.<sup>21</sup>**

**4. You prepare before me a table [where I feast]  
Before my enemies [who look] on [from] all sides;  
[You] make my heart undaunted and brave;<sup>23</sup>  
You anoint my head  
With your [Holy] Spirit, the oil of joy,<sup>24</sup>  
And [thereby] pour my soul full  
Of your spiritual joy.<sup>25</sup>**

**5. Good things and the [Lord's] mercy  
Follow after me in life,  
And I will always fittingly<sup>26</sup> dwell**

fürchte ich kein Unglück" ("And if I yet walk in the dark valley, I will fear no misfortune/calamity"), and thus Lutheran interpreters understood this "valley" more as a place of wide-ranging enemy dangers than a place of death per se.

<sup>18</sup>In the 1731 text booklet and some contemporary hymn books, this line reads "Und dieser Welt bö's Tücke" ("And the evil malice of this world").

<sup>20</sup>These lines draw on the language of 2 Thessalonians 1:4, "wir uns euer rühmen unter den Gemeinen Gottes, von eurer Geduld und Glauben, in allen euren Verfolgungen und Trübsalen, die ihr duldet" ("among the congregations of God we [Paul, Silas, and Timothy] boast of you [Christians of Thessalonica], of your perseverance and faith, in all your persecutions and tribulations that you are enduring").

<sup>21</sup>In "Auf dein Wort ich mich lasse," the word "lasse" is a poetically clipped version of "verlasse": the line is adapted from Psalm 119:42, "Ich verlasse mich auf dein Wort" ("I put my trust in your word").

<sup>22</sup>Some modern editions read "vor" here, but Bach's own score and his original performing parts read "für" in line 1 and also in line 2. In Luther's biblical translation these lines end with an accusative construction: "Du bereitest für mir einen Tisch *gegen meine Feinde*" ("You prepare before me a table opposite my enemies"). In later Bibles this was updated to read with a genitive construction: "Du bereitest vor mir einen Tisch *im Angesicht meiner Feinde*" ("You prepare before me a table in view of my enemies"). In Bach's cantata the hymn text of this movement reads, a bit clumsily, with a dative construction: "Du bereitest *für* mir einen Tisch *für mein[en] Feinden*" (literally, "You prepare before [i.e., 'in front of'] me a table before [i.e., 'in the face of'] my enemies"). In the 1731 cantata booklet the lines read "Du bereitest *für* mir einen Tisch *vor* mein'n Feind[']n" (which carries the very same meanings as what appears in Bach's score and performing materials). All conceivable combinations of these words were given in the hymnbooks of Bach's day.

<sup>23</sup>The older-German expression "ein frisches Herz haben" meant "to be brave-hearted."

<sup>24</sup>Because in traditional Christian reading of Psalm 45:8 the "king" who is "anointed with oil of joy" is taken to be king Jesus (the "joy" here referring to his subjects' gladness surrounding his being crowned as king), and because Acts 10:38 narrates that "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit," Christian interpretation came to understand religious joy as being "anointed with oil of joy," a metaphor for being filled with the Holy Spirit.

<sup>25</sup>"Freuden" here is presumably singular; in older German an "n" was often appended for feminine nouns in dative and genitive constructions in the singular.

<sup>26</sup>"Eben" has a huge and bewildering variety of meanings in older German; here it is apparently employed as a synonym for "angemessen" in its sense of "fittingly."

**Im Haus des Herren eben,  
Auf Erd in christlicher Gemein,  
Und nach dem Tod da werd ich sein  
Bei Christo, meinem Herren.**

Wolfgang Meuslin (attrib.)

**In the house of the Lord:  
On earth in the Christian congregation,<sup>27</sup>  
And after death, where I will be [in the Christian congregation]  
With Christ my Lord.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV112> for an annotated translation

<sup>27</sup>This line refers in technical Lutheran language to what is elsewhere often termed “the congregation of saints,” “the communion of saints,” or “the Christian church,” each understood to be made up of all Christians, past, present, and future, on earth and in heaven.