

Psalm 23

A Moving Meditation for Our Lives

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

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I'm beginning my reading at the back for a reason. In the early church, Psalm 23 was often read at baptisms. The new believer was baptized at the font, which was in the entryway of the church, because baptism is the entry into the life of the church. Once the person was baptized, the congregation would recite the psalm as the new Christian walked from the font to the table, freshly laid with bread and wine, to receive Communion for the first time.

As I read this version of the psalm, please listen with your own life journey in mind. I'll pause after the reading for a few moments of silent reflection.

Psalm 23: A psalm of David

The Lord is my shepherd,
I need nothing more.
You give me rest in green meadows,
setting me near calm waters,
where you revive my spirit.

You spread a table before me
as my foes look on.
You soothe my head with oil;
my cup is more than full.

You guide me along sure paths,
You are true to your name.
Though I should walk
in death's dark valley,
I fear no evil with you by my side,
your shepherd's staff to comfort me.

Goodness and love will tend me
every day of my life.
I will dwell in the house of the Lord
as long as I shall live.

--International Commission on English in the Liturgy

I love the liturgical use of the psalm that we just experienced, because it's a visual reminder that our relationship with God is a journey—one that keeps moving and evolving, even as our lives move and evolve. Green and restful times. Periods of stillness and clarity. The ethical decisions we face every day, for which we seek the right path. The terrifying times that plunge us into darkness. The times of nurture and healing and renewal.

The Lord is my shepherd, I need nothing more.

This psalm is a moving meditation for our lives, but it begins in stillness. This version reads: “You give me rest in green meadows.” Others say, “You make me lie down in green pastures.” I lean toward that version—“you *make* me lie down”—because it’s so hard for us to do that on our own. Small children, when they’re tired, rarely just curl up and go to sleep. Instead, they become more and more keyed up, even frantic with activity, until they are made to lie still, so that sleep can overtake them.

I know the feeling, don’t you? All day long, we are bombarded with news alerts and phone calls, emails and texts and tweets. Shootings and climate change and homelessness and racism and sexual violence and unjust laws and homophobia and oppressive economic systems—everything is coming at us all at once, and everything is urgent. We feel the need to act and react, spinning an ever-growing number of plates in the air. Everything seems to depend on us—*everything!* How can we stop? How can we let down our guard, even for an instant?

And then, we read this psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. You make me lie down in green pastures.” We read this, and we can breathe again.

When I was a teenager, every now and then I would go out in our backyard and lie on my back in the grass. I always chose a spot away from the trees, where there wasn’t even a branch in my line of vision, just the sky—clear and deep and blue. Lying there, with the hum of bees, the smell of green, the warmth of the sun, it was like I was sinking into the sky, with the blue filling me like water, until any turmoil from home or school just floated away.

That’s what sleep does, when we’re able to enter it fully. Worries wash away. Pieces fall into place. We wake beside that quiet stream of clarity.

And so, the psalm begins with stillness, but it doesn’t remain in stillness. The same God who makes us lie down and rest, then guides us forward. This is not a psalm about escape: with our spirits restored, we get up and resume our journey, better-able to discern the right paths that God lays out before us. The struggles of life are part of this psalm—the hard decisions we have to make. The dark valleys we must pass through.

Where I hear this psalm most often is at funerals. I’m sure this is because of the phrase, “valley of the shadow of death,” or “darkest valley.” Many of you have been there. Some of you may be walking that valley right now—watching a loved-one fade away, or staring into the dark abyss of a terrifying diagnosis. But that dark valley has broader meaning than just our physical death—within its shadows lurk all those struggles that threaten to undo us—abusive relationships, financial ruin,

the tentacle hooks of addiction, depression so deep that “to waken is to plunge through a trap door.”¹

If we haven’t walked that dark valley yet, we will. The psalmist knows that it is a part of every life, in one form or another, and there is no lonelier place. Yet, even there, we are told, of God, “You are with us. Your rod and your staff, they comfort us.” And when the whole world is against us, there is the table to nourish us, and the anointing oil to soothe us and remind us that, though others reject us, God has marked us as God’s own.

“The Lord is my shepherd. Surely goodness and mercy, goodness and love, shall follow me, chase after me, tend me, all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord, all my days.”

This can be a hard life, these are frightening and frantic times, and we are called to respond—to walk those paths of righteousness, to face those dark valleys. But when we get overwhelmed, or when we start to think that everything depends on us, it’s time to stop, lie down, and breathe.

It is safe to stop. It is safe to give things over for a time, because the goodness and mercy that we are pursuing so frantically for ourselves and for this world, are actually pursuing us. Following us doggedly, even when we wander off-path. Tending us even when we don’t know it.

So, stop for awhile, and rest. Know that the Lord is our shepherd—we need nothing more. Feel the solid ground beneath our backs, holding us up. Breathe in the deep green of this beautiful world. Rest in the safety of the God who guards us. Gaze into the clear, cleansing waters of our baptism—

Then get up, and resume the journey.

¹ George Bilgere, “What I Want,” in *The Good Kiss* (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 2002)