

SPIRITUAL TOOLKIT: PSALM 23

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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You don't really need the museum brochure to find your way to its most famous painting - there are signs on the walls - OR you could just follow the crowds. If you really want to see the painting, you'll have to wait around. The day we were there, there was a huge crowd in front of us and everyone seemed to have a selfie stick. If you're patient enough, you can inch your way close enough to see it with your own eyes, and then, well, most people are disappointed when they actually see the Mona Lisa. It's smaller than you think it would be, and once you've seen pictures of it so many times, the real thing might be underwhelming. Plus you're conscious of all of the people swarming behind you and around you.

One commentator says that Psalm 23 is the Mona Lisa of the Psalms. It's a piece of scripture so familiar that it's sometimes challenging to see its beauty and appreciate its value. Plus - what do we know about shepherds and sheep?

I used to think that the 23rd Psalm would have been so meaningful to people in its original time and place because they were well-acquainted with the habits and behaviors of both sheep and shepherds. But one scholar believes that the first people to know this psalm would have heard it as a metaphor. In the ancient Near East, kings were known as the shepherds of their people. To say, "The Lord is my shepherd," is to affirm that God is our king, and king is a political title. When we say, "The Lord is my shepherd," we are making a more powerful statement about God, about our relationship with God, and about God's authority in our lives. It's one thing to say, "I would like God

to take care of me the way a shepherd takes care of sheep” - and that indeed is one meaning of this psalm. It’s a far more audacious claim to say that God is our absolute authority and the one to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance.

Partly because it is short and familiar, I commend this Psalm to you for your spiritual toolkit. These are words we can remember, and these are words that we can access when and where we most need them. The middle of the night. The hospital waiting room. The difficult meeting at work. The stressful commute. The time your teenager is late getting home and isn’t answering her phone.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

One translation says, “I lack nothing.” And the Message paraphrase says, “I don’t need a thing.”

Here we are on the first verse of this psalm and there’s already a problem. We **do** have needs and wants. And we have brothers and sisters in other places who are barely surviving. So Psalm 23 isn’t a description of life as it is. Instead, we have a picture of life as it is meant to be.

This psalm is not promising a life that is easy and perfect; this psalm is describing a God who wants the very best for all people. God wants a world in which people have what they need. A world where the grieving find comfort, the lonely find community, the sick have access to health care, the poor have dignity.

From this very first verse, this psalm engages our imaginations and causes us to dream, to see the world as God sees it. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.

God wants us to rest. That's what the second line of this familiar psalm says. God wants us to rest, just as was stated in the fourth commandment: the command to keep a sabbath rest. We will not experience rich, full, abundant life if we are tired all the time.

70% of Americans are sleep-deprived. Many people can't stop working, even on vacation. Some families are run ragged as they try to keep up with children's activities. Sometimes we're so tired that we spend time scrolling through our phones or mindlessly streaming. The problem with that habit is it doesn't restore us. We know this. We know that something is amiss in our lifestyles. God wants us to rest.

There is a particular crisis in every profession I know of; let me tell you an anecdote from mine. In August, when I was leading my clergy support group meeting, one of our members said that he has 16 colleagues from various denominations who have left the ministry or left their ministry position during COVID. It wasn't just an article he read; these were people he knows personally. They left because they were burned-out and depleted, mostly as a result of the demands placed on them during the pandemic.

I kept thinking about that statistic, those 16 ministers, those 16 churches. It weighed on me and tugged at me. I contacted our Association Minister, Nayiri, and talked to her about it. I asked her if there was anything I could do to help prevent more ministers from leaving their churches; I said I wanted to be part of the solution. We talked on the phone and shared some ideas; I offered to help plan a retreat. Then she emailed me. "Kelly, I've been floating your idea to various ministers. This is what

they're saying. They're tired and burned out and they know that a retreat would help them, but they think they're too tired and burned out to go on a retreat."

I haven't given up on the idea, but wow. And then I think of the health care profession, and the strain they're under, and teachers, and those in food service and transportation, and first responders...no profession is immune from stress right now. God wants us to rest.

God restores our souls.

Psalm 23 reminds us of the restorative benefits of being in nature, beside still waters, in green pastures.

God leads me in right paths for the sake of God's name.

The right path is the path that leads to abundant life. The right path is not just a straight and narrow moral path for me as an individual; it is the path of righteousness, a way of life that imagines peace and justice, wholeness for all God's people. Communal righteousness. A making all things right for everyone, for every living thing.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley (the shadow of death), I fear no evil; for you are with me.

Notice that the shepherd does not lead us away from this place, this place of our deepest troubles and fears. Instead, we walk right through it, but we do not walk through it alone. We face our deepest fears, the fear of failure, the fear of abandonment, the fear of death, because God is with us. Our fears hold no power over us because we are in God's presence.

Your rod and your staff - they comfort me.

We're back to the imagery of the shepherd and the symbols of protection.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

This psalm promises provision, abundance and restoration, the kind of life God intends for us. It could be that this verse is a foreshadowing for us of that heavenly banquet table, that experience mentioned so often throughout the Bible - there will be a time when all God's people will sit down together at the same welcome table, a table of abundance...but guess what? It's not just your friends and loved ones who experience the heavenly banquet. It's your enemies, too. So if we'll sit down at the table to eat with our enemies in heaven, does it make sense to have enemies here on earth?

And the last verse: **“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”**

The translators have done us a disservice here. Goodness and mercy don't always follow us, do they? Sometimes they do, but other things follow too. Things like worry and cancer and job loss and divorce and dementia. Here's what the Hebrew really says. The Hebrew word for follow is also translated “pursue”. It's a completely different image. God is pursuing us with goodness and mercy, no matter what else is going on in our lives. God is chasing after us, hoping we'll catch more goodness and mercy, grace, peace, forgiveness, acceptance, love. Every moment of life God is pursuing us, hounding us with goodness and kindness. This is the kind of God this psalm celebrates! A God who is our shepherd, our king, a God who grants our needs, causes us to rest and be restored, leads us in the right way of living, protects us from evil, honors and blesses us, and never stops pursuing us with goodness and kindness.

I invite you to now read this psalm with me: **(Words on Screen)**

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Let us pray. Holy God, the thought that your gracious, forgiving love is pursuing us fills us with awe and gratitude. Thank you for wanting us to live abundant lives.

Thank you for the reminder to rest. Thank you for nudging us to love our enemies.

Thank you for the promise that your love is eternal. And thank you for calling us to lives of meaning, joy and purpose as we seek to make life abundant for all your people and all your creation. In Jesus' name. Amen.