

Soul Restoration

A Reflection on Psalm 23

Psalm 23 John 10:11-13, 22-30
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I want to begin by asking an honest and authentic question. **How are things with your soul?** The world, though created by God and filled with wonder and beauty, can also be detrimental to our state of well-being – sometimes to our very lives. The world has a way of draining our energy, robbing us of the joy of living, and depleting our sense of wonder. There is not one of us who doesn't need rest, renewal and restoration for our bodies, minds, and spirits. Anxiety, fear, confusion, anger, worry, stress and the like, (which also seems to be the bottom line most that politicians peddle and promote in our day and age) all contribute to one of our deepest desires to find some peace and quiet, and a sense of healing and wholeness in our hectic lives.

What do you do to calm yourself? How do you find rest and renewal? How do you relieve your fears, anxiety and stress? Often, one of the most effective ways is to simply pause and take a deep breath. I have a framed needlepoint in my study, made by a congregation member when I was in Dallas, with only one word: Breathe. It comes in handy.

Unfortunately, a common technique to numb the pain in our lives comes in the form of avoidance or escapism, which can lead to even more troubles. That being said, however, there are times when possibly the best thing to do is to simply walk away for a while, to temporarily set aside those things that cause anxiety. I am one of those, and I know many of you are as well, who finds rest and renewal by listening to beautiful and relaxing music. I also find it when I do photography, play with my dogs, take a good long drive in the country, read a good book, and more recently, experience a bit of aromatherapy with an essential oil (I know a good dealer if you need some – she sits on the back pew). Other stress-relievers might be watching a movie, taking a hot bath, or enjoying a glass of wine – or two. Almost a year ago now came one of the greatest times of rest and renewal in my life, the 6-week sabbatical graciously offered to me by you, this congregation.

Let me ask the question again: What brings peace, calm, and rest to your life? Or perhaps I should ask that from a spiritual perspective: **Where has God led you to find rest, refreshment, and restoration?** A theological understanding that the Sacred Presence of God is present beyond, with, and within all of creation, means, of course, that we can connect with that Presence through any and all activities, at any time and at any place. So yes, for many of us **restoration can come in and through our faith and spiritual journey.** I would add that even with all our intellectual debates over the interpretation of the Bible, the scriptures themselves remain a source of comfort and strength for many. One of my favorite passages to recall when life is tough is Matthew 11:28-29 (NRSV).

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your **souls**.*

Another favorite passage, from the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, is Psalm 23. Countless people over thousands of years have found comfort in the words:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my **soul**. (Psalm 23:1-3a)*

Both of those passages refer to our **soul**. I want to take a brief detour at this point to talk about the biblical understanding of the word "soul." The English translation of *soul* is from the Hebrew word, *nephesh*, and from the Greek word, *psykhe*.

Many can identify with the way Webster's Dictionary defines soul: The spiritual nature of humans, regarded as immortal, separable from the body at death. Well I hate to mess with your understanding of the term soul, but **our modern western perspective has it wrong when we go back to the original languages**. In the Old Testament, and somewhat in the New Testament, the soul refers not just to the spiritual, but also the physical and emotional as well. **The Bible consistently refers to the soul as the entirety of a living being (and in Genesis that includes animals as well as humans) in the here and now, not as a separate entity. Your soul, then, is your total self, that which makes you, you.** Therefore, from a biblical perspective, when we declare that the Lord restores and provides rest for our soul, we need to understand that as a restoration of the totality of our being – the center of our life, emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

There is deep comfort in recognizing and acknowledging that the care of your soul, its restoration, is God's concern. To restore your soul means to revive it and to enliven it. With that, however, comes an **ethical and moral purpose**. Psalm 23 reveals that the restoration of our soul allows for divine guidance in the right paths of life, or "paths of righteousness" in the King James. What are right paths? **A right path is one that leads to what the author of the Gospel of John calls abundant life – those paths that help us to live life fully.**

The psalmist reveals, however, that sometimes our paths in life take us through dark, disturbing and threatening places. Verse 4 (in the King James Version) begins, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me." There's probably not a person in this country who hasn't heard this passage at the funeral or memorial service of a loved one. When looking at the original Hebrew language, however, we learn that the single word translated as the phrase "**shadow of death,**" is **actually too narrow of a translation. A more accurate translation is "deep darkness."** That is why the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (the version of our Pew Bibles) uses the phrase, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley."

This translation gives this psalm a much greater range of meaning and human experience than just dealing with the issue of death, important as that is. **For we all walk through valleys of deep darkness at many different times during our lives – times of great pain, sorrow, fear, anxiety, danger, crisis, illness and tragedy. What are the dark valleys that you have walked through in your life? Perhaps you're walking through one right now.**

The stark reality of this psalm is the acknowledgment that God does not necessarily prevent us from facing dangers, threats, and dark valleys. Sometimes we are tempted, however, to think we walk through those tough times alone. **The great promise of this psalm, however, and one of the most central themes throughout the entire Bible, is that no matter what the threat or difficulty we may face in life, God is right there with us.** As the psalmist declares, "For thou art with me." "God with us", literally in Hebrew, Emmanuel – is a term also associated with Jesus, carrying this Jewish theological belief directly into Christian theological thought.

As a note of interest, this phrase "for you are with me," is intentionally located at the exact center of this psalm – giving evidence to the importance of this particular understanding of God. God's Sacred Presence is always with us, always with you, to provide you with comfort, strength, and restoration of your soul. Perhaps it was in reflecting back on a difficult time in your life that you came to a better recognition of that Presence.

This is beautifully reflected in the popular poem "Footprints." In a dream the author sees scenes from his life and notices two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to him, the other to the Lord. But he finds that during the lowest and saddest points in life there was only one set of footprints in the sand instead of two. He questions why the Lord would abandon him at those particularly troubling times in life. To which the Lord responds, "My precious child, I love you and I would never leave you! During your times of trial and suffering when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

Now, I know that this poem may be a bit (or way) too over-sentimentalized for those hardcore progressive theological thinkers among us (you know who you are). But it does reflect, as does Psalm 23, one of the greatest gifts given in all the scriptures – **the promise of God's continuous presence in our lives. And I think you can apply this to whatever is your understanding of the nature and character of God.**

So perhaps like few other passages of scripture, the 23rd Psalm provides rest and restoration of our souls, bringing comfort and in times of sorrow and grief, strength and encouragement in times of fear and danger, and calm in times of anxiety and worry.

And one more quick point about the differences in meaning found in translating the Hebrew into English. Verse 6 states, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." The word "follow" is a weak translation of the Hebrew word that is used. It carries a much more active meaning, more along the lines of pursuing or chasing. It's the word used when psalmists write about how their enemies pursue them. And though this author writes about an abundant meal set in the presence of his enemies, it is not those enemies that pursue and chase after him, but rather it is God's goodness and mercy and love and kindness.

Put that visual into your mind and heart, of God chasing after you with goodness, mercy, love and kindness. It may help you to better recognize God's Presence in your life when you encounter these things.

In the end, the beautifully poetic and vivid imagery used by the psalmist expresses a **personal testimony of confidence, dependence, and trust in God. I invite you to internalize and personalize it for yourself, so that it may serve as a song of comfort, strength and confidence in your journey of faith.**

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me." (v. 4a) May that promise alone help bring restoration to your soul.

Amen.