

Shepherd of Our Souls

A Reflection on Psalm 23

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

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It's not an understatement to say that we are living in anxious times, complicated by additional chaos and uncertainty. At times like these maybe it's best not to simply ask, "How are you?", because the answer is almost always, "Fine," whether it is or not. Instead, perhaps it's better to ask, "**How are things with your soul?**" That's a question worth pondering.

The world we live in, though created by God and filled with wonder and beauty, is often detrimental to our state of well-being – sometimes to our very lives. The world has a way of creating anxiety, draining our energy, robbing us of the joy of living, and depleting our sense of wonder. Perhaps that's why scripture instructs us to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

Who among us, then, doesn't need rest, renewal and restoration for our bodies, minds, and spirits? Anxiety, fear, confusion, anger, worry, stress, and the like, all contribute to one of our deepest desires – to find some peace and quiet, a sense of healing and wholeness in our hectic lives. So let me ask:

- What does rest look like in your life?
- What could rest look like in your life?
- What practices feed your soul?
- What if you gave yourself permission to rest, rather than perform?

Author Anne Lamott wisely comments, "Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes... including you!" That's good advice. So, let me ask the question again this way: What brings peace, calm, renewal, and rest to your life – to your soul? Or perhaps I should ask that from the spiritual perspective in the context of Psalm 23. **Where has God led you to find rest, refreshment, and restoration – those green pastures and still waters?** Recall those times and places in your memory and bring them to mind when needed.

A theological understanding that the Sacred Presence of the Divine is present beyond, with, and within all of creation means, of course, that **we can connect with that Presence through any activity, and at any time at any place.** This is a central understanding in Celtic Christian spirituality and most indigenous spiritualities.

Though we (rightly) often get wrapped up in intellectual debates over biblical interpretation, the scriptures themselves remain a powerful source of comfort, hope, and strength. One of my favorite passages to recall when life is tough or filled with anxiety is **Matthew 11:28-29**, where Jesus offers the following

invitation. “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, which we call the 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. God makes me lie down in green pastures; God leads me beside still waters; **God restores my soul.***

You may have noticed that both of those biblical passages refer to our **soul**. I want to take a brief detour at this point to talk about the biblical understanding of the term “soul.” The English translation of *soul* is from the Hebrew word, *nephesh*, and from the Greek word, *psykhe*. Most folks would probably define the soul something like this: The spiritual nature of human beings, regarded as immortal, separable from the body at death. However, our 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 entirety of a living being. **Your soul, then, is your total self, that which makes you, you.** Therefore, when we declare that God 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 to be found in recognizing and acknowledging that the care of your soul, and its restoration, is of great concern to God.

To restore your soul means to revive it and to enliven it. That comes, however, with an ethical and moral purpose. Psalm 23 reveals that the restoration of our souls allows for Divine guidance in the right paths of life, or “paths of righteousness” in the King James Version. **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 and ways of life, as modeled by Jesus, 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...” There’s probably not a person in this country who hasn’t heard these words at a funeral or memorial service. When looking at the original Hebrew language, however, we learn that the single word translated as the phrase “shadow of death,” **is too narrow of a translation. A more accurate translation in English 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 and grief, fear, anxiety, crisis, illness, perhaps danger, and even 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 never promises that we won't have to face dangers, threats, and dark valleys.

Sometimes we are tempted, though, to think we walk through those tough or anxious 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, including the consequences of our own bad decisions, God is always right there with us.** As the psalmist declares, "For you are with me." The Hebrew word Emmanuel, literally "God with us", is a term associated with Jesus, carrying this Jewish theological belief directly into Christian theological thought.

God's Sacred Presence is always with and within us, always with and within you, to provide you with comfort, strength, and restoration of your soul. Yet, it is often when reflecting back on difficult and troubling times in your life that you come to a better *recognition* of that Presence which was with you all along. It's like in that popular poem ***Footprints in the Sand***, when a person dreamed of walking along the beach with God, thus two sets of footprints. But when looking back at the lowest and most troublesome times in life found only one set of footprints in the sand. After questioning why God had left, God replies, "I love you and would never, never leave you. During your times of trials and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you." While some may find this poem a bit trite and simplistic, I will admit that I have found it to be true in my own journey of life and faith.

I invite you to internalize and personalize this psalm for yourself, so that it may serve as a song of comfort, strength, peace, confidence, and rest for your soul in your journey of life and faith. Let the promise of God's constant Presence, which seeks and desires your wholeness and well-being, help bring restoration to your soul, to all our souls.

To close, I want to share a poetic reflection on Psalm 23 from Steve Garnaas-Holmes, entitled, "**Present Shepherd**".

In this time of fear and uncertainty
we look with anxiety to the future.
But the Good Shepherd leads you
into the present moment.

Anxiety is an invader from the future.
The Shepherd of our Souls offers us
courage and comfort in this moment.
Follow the path into the present.

The green pastures may be distant
from this shadowed valley,
but they are greater than you know.
You fear the smallness of your vision.

Meanwhile the Shepherd of our Souls is here
with us, leading us, right now.
Behold this moment. Behold the love.
Look till you see beauty. Stay till you know.

It is not protection from the future,
but the presence of the Shepherd,
even in the darkest day, that is our peace.
Trust that peace. Follow that shepherd

into this moment. Be present.
Stop and breathe, and breathe again.
No matter what happens in the future
God is here, with you, now. Be present.

Amen.