

### Reflection on Psalm 23

YHWH, you are my shepherd --  
I want nothing more.  
You let me lie down in green meadows;  
you lead me beside restful waters:  
you refresh my soul.  
You guide me to lush pastures  
for the sake of your Name.  
Even if I'm surrounded by shadows of Death,  
I fear no danger, for you are with me.  
Your rod and your staff-- they give me courage.  
You spread a table for me in the presence of my enemies,  
and you anoint my head with oil --  
my cup overflows!  
Only goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life  
and I will dwell in your house, YHWH,  
for days without end. (Inclusive version)

#### Reflection #1 – Listening for healing

This is a very familiar and ubiquitous psalm – read at funerals, recited when people are scared in movies, painted in various Sunday School depictions of days gone by, to the point that we may either dearly love it, or we may have become insensitive to the wisdom of this beautiful 3000 year old poem. It is a wonderful poem. It speaks of God's constant companionship and provision, of hardship, fear, restoration, conflict and of a sense of belonging. It does not guarantee no problems, but that rather that God will be with us through those problems. It gives comfort and courage and, in so doing brings hope.

What we just heard was an inclusive version that avoids male language for God. I thought I'd like that, and it was good, but it's just not quite right until we hear a more familiar version – maybe one you have memorized – is the King James version. (Try to say it with me)

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
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.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my  
head with oil; my cup runneth over.  
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. (KJV)*

If you don't have it memorized I strongly encourage you to do so.

Today, during the time we have set apart for the sermon, I would like to invite us to try something a little different, something we don't often have time to do. I invite you to a time of reflection. It will be less of a matter of listening to me, and more of a matter of listening to Scripture and then to yourself and to God's voice, however you understand that dynamic.

**Today, using this psalm as a starting point: let's try to hear it as an invitation from God towards healing and wholeness.**

Now, I can't define what that looks like for you, at this moment in your life – healing and wholeness.

I can't say if it has something to do with your body or your soul. If it has something to do with a close relationships, whether it is about church or about family or about work or about grief or about fear or exhaustion. Maybe it's a bit of all of this.

I can't guess if healing and wholeness for you involves making amends with someone else or just making some shift inside of you, whether it is a cry for help to God or even if you're feeling just fine. If that is the case, or if this is outside your comfort zone, please use this as a time of prayer on behalf of others here among us who are struggling, or for this crazy world we are living in.

We will have three times for reflection, where I will give you some ideas to think about, suggestions and questions, and then some silence where you can just take deep breaths, mull over your thoughts and feelings, write something down or just in your mind's eye picture yourself resting by still waters.

That's the plan: listen to the psalm, and follow the path your thoughts and feelings lead you and see where it takes you.

You will not be asked to talk about it out loud and please be respectful of each other's experience and space as we engage with it in our own way.

**The first step is to slow down so we can listen:**

Plant your feet on the ground, if you wish close your eyes, let go of anything you are holding physically or metaphorically, make yourself comfortable and take some deep breaths ...

... and when you're ready take in this question: **What would healing or wholeness look like for me today? (Silence)**

A Psalm of David.

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.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.

(HWB #148 By the Waters of Babylon-- When you hear Babylon in this song, think of it as being in a place where you don't want to be, and think of Zion as somewhere better or somewhere you'd would like to be or go back to – not in terms of physical geography but in terms of your emotional landscape)

## **Reflection #2 – Some thoughts on the words of the psalm**

We've asked ourselves What would healing or wholeness look like for me today?

Now some thoughts on the words.

By calling God a shepherd, this psalm speaks about a desire to be taken care of and tended to. Another way of saying it is: "The Lord is my Shepherd, what more do I need?"<sup>1</sup>

A shepherd guides sheep to what they most need: good water and good nourishment, to refreshment and restoration. The green pasture evokes an assurance of nurture and growth, green is also a very calming colour. *Lying down in green pastures.*

A shepherd fends off predators and dangers and prepares a field for grazing by removing any poisonous plants, snakes or scorpions. In the evening, as the sheep are corralled, the injured or sickly ones are treated with oil on their wounds.<sup>2</sup> Or oil on their heads keeps away the gnats and flies that get away of their vision. *You prepare a table and anoint my head with oil.*

Water that is out of control can do a lot of damage – like feelings that are out of control. Maybe your place of hurt is about feelings that have lost control. But still waters – the ones the psalm mentions -- are a place of reset, of bringing things back into boundaries, of calm. This is the place where you are being invited to come to. *Beside still waters.*

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Harold Kushner, *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty Third Psalm*

<sup>2</sup> See *Preaching through the Christian Year – A*, Trinity Press International

*Leading in the right paths.* Sometimes we think of this as the “straight and narrow” but it is more likely about winding paths that circle up and around hills and mountains of the shepherds who inspired this psalm. In your journey of healing, if you feel frustrated because “you’ve been here before” or “this scenery looks familiar” consider whether you might just be further along a path that winds and doubles back on itself every so often. *Leading in the right paths.*

Now listen to the psalm in different words:

The Schechinah, [God’s] sheltering presence, makes me whole:  
Causing me to rest in green fields, Leading me to calming waters, Replenishing my soul,  
And empowering me to make life affirming choices In celebration of God’s name.  
Even though I have walked in darkness and known loss,  
I have not despaired for you are with me.  
Your guidance and your nurturing spirit have sustained me.  
You have set a full table for me when I have been hurt and alienated.  
You have [covered me in what I need to heal].  
From the deep core of my being I am overflowing with gratitude.  
I know that your goodness and loving kindness will continue to abide within me,  
And I will live out my days in God’s house.<sup>3</sup>

As we enter this next time of reflection, consider these questions:

**What are you being offered that restores your soul?**  
**Do you need to confess some wrongdoing and press a reset button?**  
**Where do you need some healing oil to be applied in your life?**  
**Are there places where gratitude will help you gain perspective?**

**Try to form a silent prayer that puts your experience and desire into words.**  
**(Silence)**

(Song #352, Gentle Shepherd)

### **Reflection #3 – Assurance**

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.* When we face a crisis, or a threat, our first reaction is fight or flight.<sup>4</sup> This psalm invites us to stay in the presence of our adversaries – be they real or imagined enemies, be they the voices of judgment inside of us that always seek to undermine. With the assurance that God is with us, we are invited to resist fight or flight.

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<sup>3</sup> adapted from <https://ritualwell.org/ritual/feminist-interpretation-psalm-23>

<sup>4</sup> DVD, Reflection on Psalm 23 for People with Cancer.

As Anabaptists, we also understand this imagery of banquets with enemies, to be an invitation to reconciliation. Ponder whether as part of your healing, you need to make a move towards someone and ask for forgiveness. Maybe not a grand gesture, but a simple “I’m sorry, that wasn’t right.” Or a small note or text. You’d be amazed at how healing this can be.

Hear the words of Rabi Harold Kushner, who wrote a book on this Psalm: “The psalmist teaches us to see the world without illusions that nothing bad will ever happen, but without the fear that we will be utterly destroyed by the things that do happen. We will hurt, but we will heal. We will grieve, but we will grow whole again. Even as the flocks need the shepherd because there are wolves in the world, we will find the world a less frightening and more livable place because *“Thou art with me.”*”<sup>5</sup>

In our last time of reflection take a moment to make some commitments about your healing:

- perhaps a commitment to be content – I shall not want,
  - perhaps a commitment to not heed the voices of anxiety inside of you – I will fear no evil,
  - perhaps a commitment to live in the company of goodness and mercy,
  - perhaps a commitment to live in love – I will dwell in your house, Lord.
- (Silence)

As you leave the service, feel free to come forward and get a band-aid, as your visual reminder that God takes care of you and heals you in your woundedness. But also, you are welcome to come to Marilyn or to me for a simple anointing and a prayer with oil.

Let’s say the psalm together one last time (KJV).

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
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.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my  
head with oil; my cup runneth over.  
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. (KJV)*

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<sup>5</sup> Kushner, *ibid.*