

A Meditation on Psalm 23

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A familiar piece of scripture can become so familiar that we think we know what it means and what it says and that it has nothing new to teach us. Been there, done that. That which is familiar is sometimes no longer noticed. It might be too strong to say 'familiarity breeds contempt.' Or not. Such may be the case for many of us with the 23rd Psalm.

People of faith have come to this psalm for respite for centuries. It's a place of calm that, some say, brings us near to the heart of God. Jesus calls himself the good shepherd and, as he cares for his flock, he leads us to places like this: green grass, still waters, right paths, our own spot at a holy table.

We live in fractious times. We pray for peace in the world. We remember our special partnerships in Cuba, the Congo, South Sudan, Indonesia, our friends on the Mexican border, and the girls' schools in Pakistan. We've just sent around \$15,000 through our connections with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to refugees fleeing Ukraine; the fighting there rages on with no end in sight, sending women, children, and the elderly scattering into Europe, homeless, on the run. On Facebook I saw a woman whose apartment building was bombed. Before she left, she uncovered by baby grand piano and played it one last time. UNICEF reports that children make up 42-percent of the refugee population. We pray for our world faraway and our world in Champaign-Urbana-Rantoul. People we know and love are hurting. We live in fractious times.

We need a safe place in which to gather ourselves. We need to be restored for the journey that lies before us and the work we have been called to do. We need a sabbath break in a safe place.

We need the 23rd Psalm.

Listen for the word of the LORD.

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1.)

- The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- L'Éternel est mon berger: je ne manquerai de rien.
- You, Lord, are my shepherd. I will never be in need.

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2.)

- He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
- Il me fait prendre du repos dans des pâturages bien verts, il me dirige près d'une eau paisible.
- You let me rest in fields of green grass. You lead me to streams of peaceful water,

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3.)

- He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake,
- Il me redonne des forces, il me conduit dans les sentiers de la justice à cause de son nom.
- and you refresh my life. You are true to your name, and you lead me along the right paths.

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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.
- Même quand je marche dans la sombre vallée de la mort, je ne redoute aucun mal car tu es avec moi. Ta conduite et ton appui: voilà ce qui me réconforte.
- I may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won't be afraid. You are with me, and your shepherd's rod makes me feel safe.

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5.)

- Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
- Tu dresses une table devant moi, en face de mes adversaires; tu verses de l'huile sur ma tête et tu fais déborder ma coupe.
- You treat me to a feast, while my enemies watch. You honor me as your guest, and you fill my cup until it overflows.

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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.
- Oui, le bonheur et la grâce m'accompagneront tous les jours de ma vie et je reviendrai dans la maison de l'Éternel jusqu'à la fin de mes jours.
- Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life, and I will live forever in your house, Lord.

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The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. When I think of those words, I think of this:

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Matthew Story ONE

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

I need still waters. I need the rest I find at Homer Lake or on the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Coast. I'm not afraid of *still* waters.

But I grew up around water, and water is dangerous. It's teeming with life and with all of nature's raw power. Water deserves respect. You can drown in water.

And when the winds blow, and the tides rise, and the waves roll, and the creeks and bays suck at the shore in the cordgrass guts, the inlets, the marshes, and when the rains come—the water gets crazy. Rip currents can draw you out and out to the sinking deep.

The powers of all creation roil in the waters.

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Matthew Storie TWO

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The powers of all creation roil in the waters. The waters can carry away the shoreline and destroy houses made on sand and on rock; but the waters also have the power to heal.

Who isn't encouraged by the gently running stream? At the Windsor of Savoy, we sit with our friends and watch the swans glide on the pond. Life doesn't seem so rushed. Light ripples off the ocean and waves massage the shore. Sun beats down and pools upon the waters teeming with creation. Moonlight, God's perfect silver, puddles on Lake Michigan and reflects the skyline. Pelicans in the Gulf swoop and dive for fish; leviathan cruise the deep.

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

When we are quiet and still, standing at the edge of the water, we find the peace of God. Our worries sheet away. We find holy awe. We find rest.

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Matthew Storie THREE/

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The setting of the Twenty Third Psalm is one of peace and calm, but notice the action verbs:

- *The LORD* makes me lie down
- The LORD leads me;
- The LORD restores my soul.
- The LORD is with me.
- The LORD comforts me.
- The LORD prepares a table before me.
- The LORD anoints my head with oil.

As we come to rest, God is at work tending us, providing for us, nurturing us. Notice God's active care.

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And besides providing a resting place, Psalm 23 also suggests a journey. *He leadeth me...*

In the early church, when people were baptized, the congregation sang the Twenty Third Psalm as the baptized emerged from the waters. These newly baptized and confirmed people were clothed in white—new clothes!—and led from the baptismal font (located outside of the church) into the sanctuary to the table where they received their first communion.

A life of faith suggests we move from chapter to chapter, from milestone to milestone.

Psalm 23 suggests a journey: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil...*

This is a Psalm for the journey—from the waters, by way of paths of righteousness, through the valley of the shadow, to sacred meals at a holy table, and beyond.

Wherever I go—from California to Katmandu, through life's emotional roller coaster of spiritual ups and downs—God is with me. Our journey goes on and on and up and over, and God goes with us. *All the days of my life*—God leads us, God follows us, God welcomes us home.

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Matthew Storie FOUR

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AT THE TABLE:

It is the lowly shepherds who first heard about the birth of Jesus. That seems an unusual choice. *Shepherds?* It makes a strange kind of sense. The one who is born to shepherd us is announced to shepherds in the field keeping their flocks by night. This child would one day call himself “the Good Shepherd.”

Jesus the Good Shepherd invites us here: Come unto me all you who labor and are heavily burdened. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am lowly and gentle in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

Welcome home.