

# In A Rut?

Psalm 23; I John 3:16ff; John 10:11-18

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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Is First Presbyterian Church in a rut?

I hope so.

Not all ruts are bad. Consider athletes. The golfer works on her tee shot so that her body learns the stroke perfectly. She practices the shot a ton of times so that she creates a kind of muscle-memory—a rut for her swing—in order that she can hit the shot with ease.

Swimmers, quarterbacks, ice hockey wings, point-forwards—they all do it. All this practice makes it look easy out of the field. Singers and musicians do it, too. And cooks, and teachers, and preachers, and, well, you get the idea.

No all ruts are bad. We teach our kids certain routines that we want them to learn when it comes to healthy habits like brushing their teeth. There are certain things we learn by rote, so that it becomes more familiar and thereby more useful, things like dinner time prayers, and going to church on Sunday. We memorize passages of scripture (like Psalm 23) so that we can access them when we are in trouble and could use a ray of comfort. We practice giving money so that generosity becomes a natural pattern for us, a way of life that gets easier the longer we do it.

Some ruts are terrible, boring, plodding, deep, one foot in front of the other, misery. But not all ruts are bad.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm talks about ruts. God leads me in “paths of righteousness,” in “right paths,” in ruts of righteousness.” God’s path, then, is like a rut in that it safely leads us always to a good place:

- from green pastures to still waters,
- from being empty to being restored,
- through the valley of the shadow of death to a table of bounty,
- from travail to safety,
- from being lost to being home,
- from being alone to meaningful relationship—relationship with God and each other.

I’m told that, before the days when the railroad connected the west coast with the east, the horse drawn wagons, those lumbering prairie schooners, would follow the wheel ruts of the pioneers who went before them. These were good ruts, because they led westward via the safest, surest path.

So it is with God. There is divine protection along the way (a shepherd's rod and staff). And, God's rutted path leads to safety.

God's road isn't always a scenic one. And it's not always easy; there's a real prairie schooner in the Museum of Science and Technology in Chicago. It may have been an amazing means of transportation technology a hundred years ago, but it looks anything but comfortable now. Sometimes the path is hard, dark, and scary. But God's road is always the right road.

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After the naturalist John Muir left Cuba, he took inexpensive passage to California. He was astonished by the scenery. He wrote in a letter, "This valley of the San Joaquin is the floweriest piece of world I ever walked, one vast level . . . a sheet of flowers, a smooth sea." He stopped and counted 7,260 flowers in one square yard.<sup>[1]</sup>

*The Lord . . . maketh me to lie down in green pastures:  
he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul*

\* \* \*

God has called First Pres on a journey. We have, because of God's grace, worn a path to places like the Refugee Center, DREAAM House, and our ESL and Francophone family of friends. God's ruts lead us to places like Kemmerer Village in Illinois, Sangla Hill Girls' School in Pakistan, and the Iglesia Presbiteriano Reformada de Luyano of Havana.

Our partnership with our sister church in Cuba was formalized in 2012. When they are here, or we are there, we gather to worship, to pray, to learn about and experience different cultures, and to celebrate the diversity of the body of Christ. It's a good friendship, and it's important that we build such friendships around the world.

*Los santos de Luyano han sido socios en la oración. Ellos son amigos. Son familia. Gracias.* (The saints in Luyano have been partners in prayer. They are friends. They are family. Thank you.)

Our friends in Cuba are in the dark valley right now. The pandemic has been particularly difficult for them, and the economy was already precarious. Without tourism, income has plummeted. The NYTimes reports clean water problems and food shortages; in September, an unemployed tourism guide in Havana waited only two hours to get into the government-run supermarket. Usually, the waits can mean eight or 10 hours. For the first time in a long time they had toothpaste.<sup>[2]</sup>

What is to blame? The revolution of 1959? The colonialism of the early twentieth century? Governmental mismanagement? The collapse of the Soviet Union. The failure of the Venezuelan economy? The US Embargo on Cuba? I'm not a political scientist or historian. I just know our friends are quietly suffering.

Chicken, oil, rice, corn, and beans. There's a shortage.<sup>[2]</sup> People wait in long lines and often leave with empty bags.

*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.*

God's ruts have led First Pres into a complicated, beautiful relationship with our sister congregation in Luyano. And these faithful saints remind us what faithful trust looks like:

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

When we visit, they serve us hard-to-come-by eggs every morning. They save their coffee for us so we can drink it in abundance. We have so much to learn from our friends at Luyano about hospitality, about community, about generosity, about patience, about long-suffering, about family, about loving-kindness, about sacrifice.

Thank God that God has led us in ruts of friendship that lead all the way across the ocean and back.

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Jesus, the Good Shepherd, walks with us. Jesus the good shepherd nudges us when we go astray, steadies us when the valley is dark, and celebrates with us when the valley is covered with too many flowers to count.

Faith doesn't give us the answers so much as it gives us the path.

Is First Pres in a rut?

I certainly hope so.

Alleluia!

AMEN

And thanks be to God that of all the well-worn and oft-trod paths God has provided for us, the path to this table is clearly marked and well used. Jesus invites us all to this table of Grace. Come....

## Psalm 23

King James Version

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 forever.

## 1 John 3:16-24

16We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.  
17How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

## John 10:11-18

11"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. . . 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

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<sup>[1]</sup> *The Writers' Almanac*, April 21, 2021.

<sup>[2]</sup> It was a lucky day for the unemployed tourism guide in Havana. The line to get into the government-run supermarket, which can mean a wait of eight or 10 hours, was short, just two hours long. And better yet, the guide, Rainer Companioni Sánchez, scored toothpaste — a rare find — and splurged \$3 on canned meat. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/20/world/americas/cuba-economy.html>, accessed April 26 2021)

<sup>[3]</sup> (Havana Times, retrieved April 26, 2021, <https://havanatimes.org/features/cuba-the-decline-of-a-country-running-out-of-food/>).