

# Practices with the Shepherd

Rev. Brenda Satrum, April 2021

## **“I Will Dwell in Your House Forever”**

What if we turn our attention to the Shepherd attending us? Our first parents, Adam and Eve enjoyed walking with God in the cool of the day. Take a walk, hike, or reflective sit (try for at least 30 minutes) to dwell with your Shepherd. During your time, look for reasons to offer thanks or praise—always a good way to begin a date! Use Psalm 23 as much or little as you like. Sing if that helps! (This exercise is inspired partly by Audrey Assaud’s “Lead Me On” if you can find it.) Express yourself to God directly, including concerns, questions, heartaches. Listen quietly for what God might say in return if you like. There is no right or wrong way to this. When your mind wanders, gently return to the companionship of the Shepherd who loves you.

Afterwards, write about your experience, perhaps in your journal. Use these questions as they’re helpful:

- How did you feel as you walked and talked with God? If this was difficult or uneasy, do you know why?
- Did any new awareness arise?
- Did anything happen that was especially meaningful or joyful?

## **Create**

Human beings bear the image of God, who created all things, including people, whom the Bible calls God’s *poiema*, works of art, or poetry-in-motion. So make something—draw or color, paint if it’s available, shape some clay, make music, pile up rocks by the lake... Do your best to suspend any judgment about the quality of your work!

There are Psalm 23-themed coloring pages, blank paper for your free imagination... Use the Psalm as much or little as you like. Perhaps consider...

- Is there a portion of Psalm 23 that draws you? What color does it bring to mind? Are there shapes or images rising? A word that stands out?
- Is there a hope, longing, joy, or promise you’d like to express artistically?
- How do you imagine God feels to see your creativity?

## **Write your own psalm or poem**

What do you want to say to your Tender Shepherd? Model your own writing after the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm or set off in your own cherished voice. It need not rhyme or conform to any standard. Simply express yourself, knowing that your Shepherd is glad you approach and happy to receive you exactly as you are. King David, the first biblical psalmist, was quite free to “let it rip” and express ALL his thoughts and feelings, including some ugly ones, to God. You are welcome to do the same!

## Imagine

Ignatius of Loyola (founder of the Jesuit monastic order of the Catholic Church), taught imaginative prayer and meditation—inviting the God who created our imaginations to interact with us within them. The following practice offers a way to enter Psalm 23 with our imagination:

Find a quiet place where you can be alone. Choose an image or scene from the Psalm and let it develop in your imagination—the pastures, waters, paths, or valley, the Shepherd and his/her tools, the table... Let the details develop as fully as you're able, including your place in the scene, the air and temperature, season, sounds, other critters, the Shepherd. Simply rest in the scene if you like, perhaps invite or welcome God to interact with you...

As with any spiritual exercise, there's no wrong way to do this, no right answers...

Feel free to write about your experience afterwards. How did it feel as you imagined yourself into the Psalm? Was it weird, forced, wonderful, joyous, something in-between? Did you see or hear anything that surprised you? Is there anything you thought, envisioned, felt, or "heard" that you want to remember?

## Pray

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) was a beloved spiritual teacher and leader. He offers a simple prayer practice that would be easy to include in a retreat, at home, or anywhere:

"I invite you to try following a prayer discipline for ten minutes a day or so for a week, and then to discuss your experience with your spiritual director or prayer group.

1. Simply set apart a specific time and place to "waste" a little time alone with yourself and God. What time of day will you pray, and where will you pray?
2. Add to your particular time and special place a single focus. This can be an image, a word, a phrase of scripture, or a short meditative prayer that is repeated.
3. When distractions come or you feel anxious or sleepy, acknowledge the distraction—don't fight it—then simply return to your image, phrase, or scripture.
4. Embrace the silence between the repetitions in prayer. This is how you create space for God to be present.
5. Sometimes, within our sacred time and place and focus, God speaks a simple word for us to hear. Learn to listen to the still, small voice.

"Many people who do this regularly eventually find that they don't want to miss their prayer time—even though it doesn't emotionally satisfy them right away. They may be distracted throughout the whole ten minutes, but they keep going back to it. They say that 'something is happening to me on a deeper level than my thinking.'

"I too don't always have wonderful thoughts or feelings when I pray. But I believe that something is happening because God is greater than my mind and heart. The larger mystery of prayer is greater than what I can grasp with my emotional senses or intellectual gifts. I trust that God is greater than me when I dwell—let myself be held—in that place of prayer. Eventually, when I do this I do live a very spiritual\* life." (*Spiritual Direction*, 69)

\*By "spiritual" I imagine Nouwen meant well-connected to God, self, and others.