

ELW Psalm 23

- ¹The LORD | is my shepherd;
I shall not | be in want.
- ²The LORD makes me lie down | in green pastures
and leads me be- | side still waters.
- ³You restore my | soul, O LORD,
and guide me along right pathways | for your name's sake.
- ⁴Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall | fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they | comfort me.
- ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence | of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is | running over.
- ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days | of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the | LORD forever.

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Psalm 23, KJV/RSV Hybrid

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 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 my 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.

Psalm 23, Robert Alter

A David psalm.

The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
In grass meadows He makes me lie down
By quiet waters guides me.
My life He brings back.
He leads me on pathways of justice
For His name's sake.

Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow,
I fear no harm,
For You are with me.
Your rod and Your staff—
It is they that console me.
You set out a table before me
In the face of my foes.
You moisten my head with oil,
My cup overflows.
Let but goodness and kindness pursue me
All the days of my life.
And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
For many long days.

SUPER NOTES IN THIS EDITION! PERTINENT:

- "Makes me lie down" = specialized verb (*hirbits*) for quieting animals for rest.
- "Life" = *nephesh*, for breath, resuscitation, putting **physical life** back
- "Pathways of justice" = **ways of life** that lead to **individual and community well-being**, ways that get the psalmist and their community toward conformity with God's good will
- "Vale of death's shadow" = *begey tsalmawet*, experience of **personal threat of death**
- Note the turn to God in second person, **You**, in this moment of terror or vulnerability. (Really? Fear no harm? Lack nothing. Huh.)
- "Oil" *dishen* is not the verb for a formal or religious anointing, but for a **pleasant experience**. The sense here is toward "all the physical elements of a happy life"
- "For many long days" = there isn't an "eternity" referred to here. **Just a good, long life.**

Psalm 23, TANAKH, *The Jewish Study Bible*

A psalm of David.

The LORD is my shepherd; I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 He leads me to water in places of repose;
 He renews my life;
 He guides me in right paths as befits His name.
Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness
 I fear no harm, for You are with me;
 Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.

You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies;
 You anoint my head with oil; my drink is abundant.
Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me
 all the days of my life,
And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for many long years.

PERTINENT NOTES:

- “Some scholars now interpret the psalm as an exilic or postexilic portrait of a new exodus, from the exile to the return in the land of Israel, which invites us to **experience God guiding the flock through the difficult journey back from Babylonia, then hosting them at his table in the rebuilt temple.**
- Shepherd is a frequent biblical and Near Eastern metaphor for royalty (David, Moses, Hammurabi)
- “house of the Lord” is commonly the temple, and also, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it...” Where is earth the footstool?
- “many long years” = “for length of days”, commonly this life, but also traditionally referring to the next life and **frequently used in Jewish funerals** and commemorations of the dead. The phrase just begs for this.

Psalm 23, *The Psalter: A Faithful and Inclusive Rendering*

*From the Hebrew into contemporary English,
intended primarily for communal song and recitation*
© 1995, Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications.

A Psalm of David

The Lord is my shepherd, I need nothing more.
You give me rest in green meadows,
Setting me near calm waters where you revive my spirit.

You guide me along sure paths,
You are true to your name.
Though I should walk in death's dark valley,
I fear no evil with you by my side,
Your shepherd's staff to comfort me.

You spread a table before me as my foes look on.
You soothe my head with oil; my cup is more than full.
Goodness and love will tend me every day of my life.
I will dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live.

Psalm 23, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson

GOD, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
 You find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word, You let me catch my breath
 And send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through Death Valley,
I'm not afraid when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
 My cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of GOD
 For the rest of my life.

Psalm 23, My Own Version (MOV)

Breath of Life, because you are my shepherd, I want for nothing
You provide safe rest for me and my sisters and brothers,
 and your voice soothes us to sleep.
You lead me to drink from calm and refreshing water.
You breathe new life into me over and over again.
You lead me in ways of life that are so very good for me, for others,
 for our beautiful world—because you're just like that;
 this is very well-known.
Even when I walk through the most life-threatening valley,
 I am not afraid.
For you are with me.
 You use your rod and staff to comfort, guide, and care for me.
You lay a delightful and wholesome feast before me,
 and with You I settle down and enjoy it
 even though enemies assail me within and without.
You rub me with sweet oil, scratch my itchy back,
 and wash my dirty feet.
Wow. My cup of joy overflows with the love you offer me,
 a sheep of your fold.
Surely goodness and lovingkindness companion my every step,
 every breath.
No matter where I go, my heart-soul is safe-home with You.

Psalm 23, YOUR Own Version (YOV)

Session Three: Though I should wander...

The shepherd's rod is a short, stout clublike tool used for several things. 1) As a tool for counting: sheep would pass under the shepherd's rod on their way into the fold. 2) As a probe into the sheeps' wool to search for sores, wounds, or bugs. 3) As a projectile—thrown ahead of a sheep to startle it away from a place or path or thrown as a weapon at threatening predators. The rod was not used to hit sheep.

The shepherd's staff is a long pole, often with one curved end. Like the rod, it has several uses: 1) To lay alongside a sheep as a connection point, a comfort. 2) To nudge the sheep in a particular direction. 3) To reach out and hook a sheep in deep brambles or in another somewhat distant difficulty to pull it free.

Look back at each decade of your life. What times you would count to be your "shadowed valleys"? Choose one time and describe it: How were you alone? Who showed up for you and how?

What were your greatest fears or concerns during that time?

Did God come to you in any way in your valley wanderings? Through prayer, another person, through scripture or your community of friends or believers did you ever feel that you were accounted for, probed, warned, protected, connected, comforted, nudged, rescued, or in any other way attended?

Is your present circumstance more like a well-watered pasture or a shadowed valley? What are you longing for? What are you noticing? Is there something you need or want from God that you might ask for right now? Plan to bring your want or need to Prayer Around the Cross, and perhaps receive anointing and silent or spoken intercessory prayer for you and your petition.

A Reading for Wandering the Valley

From *Candlelight: Illuminating the Art of Spiritual Direction*, Susan S. Phillips. © 2008, Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing. Pages 216-218

Phillips companioned a woman named Ruth as her spiritual director across several years that included cancer treatment and Ruth's eventual death. This passage tells of Phillips' last visit with her friend and directee...

* * *

I told her what I had brought with me and said I would be happy to read Scripture to her, give her Communion, and/or anoint her with oil. She replied, "I want it all. First, I'd like to hear you read the Twenty-Third Psalm. It has that bit in it about eating and anointing. How apropos." Indeed.

I read to her: "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 midst 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."

I saw Ruth had closed her eyes, so I waited. A tear welled up under her eyelid. She was squeezing my hand hard. Taking a deep breath, she repeated, "Surely I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. Amen." When she opened her eyes, they were sad. She declared, "I don't fear. My cup does overflow. I trust. But I grieve, too."

"And so do I," I confessed.

"I know you do," she said kindly. "That's why you can be here. Now let's get to the eating and anointing."

I read the words of institution for Communion and served her the elements. Amazingly, she was able to swallow the wine and bread. Then from *The Book of Common Prayer* I prayed, "'Sanctify, we beseech thee, O Lord, the sickness of this thy servant; that the sense of her weakness may add strength to her faith, and seriousness to her repentance; and grant that she may dwell with thee in life everlasting; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'" Then, marking the Cross on her forehead with oil, I said, "I anoint you with oil, Ruth, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Ruth's skin under my hand on her forehead was dry and cool. I kept my hand there as she whispered "Amen" and lay on the pillow, her eyes shut. I watched blood throb in a vessel in her neck and wondered at this mingling of life and death. Such powerful mysteries I was grateful for those words passed down through the centuries, read by millions of grieving people at the sides of those they loved. The communion of saints seemed close, hovering near as Ruth's breath mingled with mine.

Never one to let an unanswered question go by, Ruth opened her eyes and asked, “What does ‘repentance’ mean?”

I answered as best I knew, that repentance means turning again toward God, often involving confession and accepting forgiveness. “I like that,” she affirmed. “I am turning again toward God. My life has been a long turning, and a series of turnings toward God. He leads me in right paths. I am past regretting all the dead-ends I explored, and the meandering and traipsing I did in getting here. It’s all part of the path I was on, and I know now that Christ was with me on it. He restores my soul. Part of that restoration is a shedding of regrets. I used to be riddled with regret. And with striving. I am forgiven. Now I feel at peace. I shall not want I shall dwell with God.”

As she spoke, Ruth’s eyes slowly closed and her speech grew faint. Those were the last words she spoke to me. I heard her speak to others, but I was not alone with her again. I stayed for a few hours, during which she dozed and then roused to conversation, then dozed again. At times she was held in a circle of love that she had woven with women friends. Philosophers write about “a good death.” Ruth’s death struck me as beautiful.

* * *

What stands out for you in this story?

Do you hear a word of grace or invitation?

Do you find yourself longing for, hoping for, or grateful for something?

Do you experience the presence of the Shepherd in this story, in this moment?