

Psalm 23 "Beginning with Rest"

Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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"Through the Valley of the Shadow" Harold Kushner

For the 35 years that I was a congregational rabbi, no matter how grievous a funeral was, no matter how tragic a memorial service was, if I just started to recite the familiar words of the 23 Psalm – "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures ..." – it tranquilized the congregation. It just made people feel calm. I never understood why. And then, right after 9/11, after that horrifying attack ... , when everybody was asking me, "Where was God that Tuesday, how could God have let such a thing happen?" the answer I found myself giving was: "You know, God's promise was never that life would be fair. God's promise was, when it's your turn to confront the unfairness of life, no matter how hard it is, you'll be able to handle it, because [God will] be on your side. [God] will give you the strength you need to find your way through.

My friend Ed was in bad shape. Bad luck. Bad timing. Bad prognosis. A bit of a hipster, with a dry wit and a big heart he'd long ago put distance between himself and the church of his upbringing. As a Catholic, he'd likely seen the 23rd Psalm more often on funeral cards than spoken in the quiet of Mass.

Ed's brother was in the room when the priest – a hospital chaplain - stopped in. When the priest came into Ed's focus he recoiled, assuming that a priest in the room couldn't have been a good sign. We all laughed at this part of the story but were quickly sobered when we learned the next part of the story. Ed then asked the priest to pray the 23rd Psalm. Hearts racing with the shock that is bad luck and prognosis were calmed with the psalmist's poetry:

A Psalm of David

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;^[a]

³ he restores my soul.^[b]

He leads me in right paths^[c]
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,^[d]

I 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;
my cup overflows.

⁶Surely [\[e\]](#) goodness and mercy [\[f\]](#) shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

A friend writes me:

“Life is just so lifey”. And when it is most excruciatingly “lifey”, when hearts are raw or afraid we yearn for balm. For strength. And the poetry that is Psalm 23 brings balm and then strength in full measure.

The rabbi recalls that no matter how deep the tragedy, the music that is the fruit of love begins: “The Lord is my shepherd...” and remarkably, brings calm to those who suffer.

Now, the psalm is *not* the answer to the petition that shouts:

“Please bring him home”

or

“Please. Let this pregnancy come to term”

or

“Please. Let her be cured!”

or

“Please. May this week be the week that the job will come.”

These prayers of petition are exactly where we most often begin the journey through the valley. That starting block is a place of deep vulnerability. Stranded in the valley of heartbreak ... anxiety ... our need is as exposed as an open wound. We are the walking wounded.

And so, often the first prayer we utter is this one: “Help”.

Specific prayers for which we seek specific outcome:

Reunion.

Birth.

Cure.

Work.

A candle is lit and illuminates a sliver of hope through its small light. Because that's all we need to be on our way. A bit of trust that ...

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I have all I need,
She makes me lie down in green meadows,
Beside the still waters, She will lead." Bobby McFerrin

And with that, the psalmist – and Bobby McFerrin – is on his way. Eastern wisdom says that every long journey begins with a single step. (Lao-Tzu) In the dark valley the only way out is straight through. We are none of us offered a detour.

The rabbi reminds:

"You know, God's promise was never that life would be fair. God's promise was, when it's your turn to confront the unfairness of life, no matter how hard it is, you'll be able to handle it, because [God will] be on your side. [God] will give you the strength you need to find your way through." (Harold Kushner)

The calm that is born of the 23rd psalm is essentially about harboring strength enough to *walk through* the darkest valley with God's promise of steady companionship.

*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.*

When the bad news comes, when we suddenly find ourselves in the darkest valley we are thrown into overdrive: Anxious. Worried. Problem-solving. Overwhelmed. When we are in that most vulnerable state, what do we need? Rest. Beauty. Green meadows. Still waters. Love. Assurance that we are cared for no matter what. Through it all.

Is it no wonder that the Psalm's initial invitation is one of rest? Actually, we are not *offered* a chance to rest, we are *made* to "lie down in green pastures". We are *led* beside still waters. God as your bossiest and most loving Friend. The table is set. We are anointed. We are cared for. Our souls are restored.

Let's pause here for a moment. This is a lesson in the most powerful pastoral care. When those you love are in that dark valley don't be asking them what they need. Consider this: when you were last in that dark valley were you able

to effectively articulate what you needed other than to say, "I need to get out of the damn valley!"? Likely not. You know what the suffering ones need because you have yourself suffered. Make them lie down. Lead them to still water.

Because rest ... calm ... restores the soul.

And then ... blessedly ... we just may find strength to handle whatever challenge or tragedy or loss with which we are faced – and without blaming God for something that was never promised.

In time, trust will grow as will strength. Comes the assurance:

*Even though I walk through a dark and dreary land
There is nothing that can shake me
She has said She won't forsake me. (Bobby McFerrin)*

The moment comes when hope washes over our fear in the wake of the perfect storm's wreckage. You stand in the ruins and take inventory: Does my cup run over? Do I have all that I need to get through? And you whisper to yourself: "Yes". No matter the outcome – which will likely be different than you imagine – you have all that you need to get through the valley no matter that there is so much debris in the chaotic now.

You will not be removing the obstacles ... creating a new reality ... alone. You will not be stranded stuck ... in that valley. You begin to trust that you will get home.

The Psalm ends with gratitude. Don't most journeys end this way? "I will live in her house forever and ever." Says the grateful son.

In fact, the son brings it home in a new way as he holds his mother in the light:

*The Lord is my Shepherd, I have all I need,
She makes me lie down in green meadows,
Beside the still waters, She will lead.*

*She restores my soul, She rights my wrongs,
She leads me in a path of good things,
And fills my heart with songs.*

*Even though I walk, through a dark & dreary land,
There is nothing that can shake me,
She has said She won't forsake me,
I'm in her hand.*

*She sets a table before me, in the presence of my foes,
She anoints my head with oil,
And my cup overflows.*

*Surely, surely goodness & kindness will follow me,
All the days of my life,
And I will live in her house,
Forever, forever & ever.*

*Glory be to our Mother, & Daughter,
And to the Holy of Holies,
As it was in the beginning, is now & ever shall be,
World, without end. Amen Bobby McFerrin*

For those Souls who call this place home, I remind you that you have access to the power of this holy poetry for it describes the human condition that in many ways is unchanged since the psalmist put quill to papyrus. Your idea of God may be different. You may bristle at the thought. But remember, it's a poem. It is metaphor. The power therein is the reminder that Love / God / Spirit is what gets us through the valley. Goodness, mercy, and kindness follow us through the valley as we all are trying to find our way home.

We wend our way to the places that remind us of the psalmist's journey for it is our own journey. We wend our way home. We wend our way to the homes of friends who will make us lay down our burdens. We wend our way to All Souls where we join our voices with others. Voices that at first may shake but then gain strength with encouragement: "Lean on Me ... when you're not strong ... and I'll help you carry on ..."

And so when life gets just so lifey, when it is you offering up the prayer that begins and ends with "Help", you may tap into that power that through the ages to this moment on this day, assures us that goodness and kindness follow through all the days of your life.

As it was in the beginning, is now & ever shall be, World, without end. Amen.

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