

**Rest, Restoration, and Renewal**  
**(or, Provision, Protection, Presence)**  
**Matthew 11:28-30                  Psalm 23**

Someone called Psalm 23 the Mona Lisa of the Psalms. Because like the Mona Lisa, it's well-known, and it is iconic in its beautiful imagery and feel. And, because Psalm 23 is so well-known, it can easily be taken for granted because we've heard it and read it so many times. So, I'll read it slowly... (take a breath)

**Psalm 23**    New Revised Standard Version

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 presence 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.

    This is the word of the Lord.

We love this Psalm, don't we? For many, it is known as the Psalm that is read at bedsides in homes and hospitals, or at memorial services. And rightly so, for the comfort and assurance it gives.

I believe it is well-loved also, in part, because instinctively people know (*we know*) that we need a shepherd. In other words, we need leadership for our lives. We all need someone to guide us through this labyrinth called life. We read in the gospel of Matthew that, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, *like sheep without a shepherd.*" (Matthew 9:36). This affirms that people need and want leadership and direction for their lives, and Jesus offers that. With compassion. With heart. He is not authoritarian or a bully leader, but a compassionate leader who gently—*and* sometimes sternly—leads us. After all he has a rod and a staff; mostly to ward off danger, and sometimes to prod the sheep in the right direction! But, as he said in the reading from Matthew, he is gentle and humble in heart, and leads us in that manner. And we need leadership for our lives.

In John's gospel (ch. 10) Jesus says, "I am the *good* shepherd..." In that whole passage Jesus says that there are *bad* shepherds out there, and they want to influence your life, or lead you, in ways that can be destructive, which don't bring you life, which, Jesus says, is his goal for you. In fact, Jesus says (in that

Good Shepherd passage in John 10:10), “I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.” And so he identifies himself as the Good Shepherd (emphasis on good) who can provide leadership for our lives that produces abundance. To put it in Psalm 23’s terms, an overflowing cup, an anointing with oil—both of which are a sign of abundant blessing and of peace.

And what I appreciate about Jesus’ words, and about Psalm 23, is that even though the imagery is lovely, and comforting, it’s realistic about life, that it has stresses, and difficulties. There are enemies, it says. David had literal enemies in the form of other humans who were out to get him; but we can think of other kinds of enemies, situationally, perhaps, or even in our own minds because sometimes we are our own worst enemy, right? Stinking thinking, as it’s called.

Also, the Psalm famously speaks of the darkest valleys (“the valley of the shadow of death” as it says in the old translations). The actual meaning of this in the original Hebrew is ambiguous, probably on purpose, so that we can read into it what we consider dark valleys for ourselves. These dark valleys present situations that we need to be protected from (again, rod and staff suggest that protection is needed).

So, there is an honesty about the fact that there are stresses and difficulties, which, in our day, can come from multiple sources: work stress, school stress (esp.

at the end of the year for students and teachers), challenges with relationships, angry and hurting people that we encounter, financial stress, illness, and even the reality of death itself.

And in the midst of all this, we are assured: Jesus, our Good Shepherd, leads us. And according to the Psalm, we are led both *to*, and *through*. We are led *to...* *to* places of refreshment and restoration (green pastures, still waters). And we are led *through*: *through* the darkest valleys, Dark places are places *we get through*, and don't just go to. They aren't the destination, but sometimes the journey goes through them. And in one of the great statements of faith and trust, David says that even though we go through those dark valleys, "I will fear nothing, for you are with me." God's presence is enough. God's protection is sure. I wish I could be as certain as David is that "I will fear nothing," but it is a comforting thought and a wonderful aspiration. I don't need to be afraid. God is with me, always.

This reminds us of Jesus' most oft-repeated phrase, the thing he said more than anything else...

And it may surprise us to know that the Old Testament, in many places, also says, "Fear not." We hear it in Psalm 23, we're going to hear it again next Sunday when we read Psalm 46. One other excellent example is when Moses tells the people, as they are about to cross the Red Sea, with the Egyptians in hot pursuit:

*“Don’t be afraid; see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. The Lord will fight for you; you have only to keep still.”* “Keep still” meaning, “Be inwardly calm.” Those are beautiful words, and the Bible (even the O.T.!) is full of encouragements like this.

And we really need to hear these encouragements these days, because there is a lot of fear and anxiety in the air. And understandably so, because the world is in a bit of turmoil. And fear and anxiety are causing people to act out in unhelpful ways. So we would do well to take these words to heart: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me.” And we do well to take to heart that Jesus wants to lead us to nourishing pastures and peaceful waters along the way. We need those sacred pauses.

There is a lot more that can be unpacked in Psalm 23, and there is a lot to be unpacked in the words of Jesus we heard from Matthew’s gospel. But to summarize, what both of these passages make clear: we need rest.

We are people who need to learn how to experience rest. Deep rest. Not just physical rest. If all we needed was some physical rest, we could take a day off and sleep in, or take a nap, or take a vacation. But where can we find deep spiritual and psychological and emotional rest—soul rest—in the midst of so much weariness and fear? Especially after two years of covid lockdown, then

post-covid adjustments and changes, which we are still living through, and will be for a while. And on top of that all of the political turmoil!

Our world has become the world of the Red Queen of Alice in Wonderland, who said: *“Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.”* I wonder how many people feel that way. And we don’t have to be outwardly busy and running all over the place to become weary and tired. There is enough going on in the world that is wearisome to heart, mind and soul, while just being at home!

And to the weary and worried of soul, God offers rest.

It’s offered in the form of green pastures and still waters, and God’s peaceful presence as we walk through hard times. And Jesus offers it, as we heard in the reading from Matthew, by offering a yoke—which at first doesn’t sound very appealing to me. After all, a yoke is a work instrument, used by beasts of burden. So it seems to me that the last thing weary people need is a yoke. But as we reflect a little deeper on Jesus’ words, he seems to imply that we’re already carrying a yoke anyway—a wearisome yoke that he implies we have chosen to carry, a self-imposed yoke—so we may as well let him take that one off of our shoulders, and let him place a new, lighter and easier yoke on us; *one that he*

*carries with us.* Because we tend to overburden ourselves. We take on too much. We worry and fuss and feel responsible and try to take charge. So what Jesus is saying is: let *me* take charge. Learn from me; let *me* do the heavy lifting. Getting back to Ps. 23 imagery, we can hear Jesus saying: let me do the shepherding, the leading. And as we go along, I'll show you how to rest.

So, what is required of us if we want the rest he offers? In a word, consent; or, surrender. People don't like the word surrender as much because it sounds like weakness or giving in; so consent is a good word. A letting go of control. This can be the challenging part of having a Good Shepherd: we must consent to his leadership. We have to let go of our need to always have control.

One of my favorite writers, Anne Lamott, has a wonderful book on prayer titled, *Help, Thanks, Wow* (she says there are only three real prayers...). In the book she talks about a "deep exhale of consent," and "going limp"—but not completely limp; we have to work with Jesus to learn a new way of being that doesn't involve me bursting blood vessels in my head and arms when I try to exert control. She says, "If I were going to begin practicing the presence of God for the first time today, it would help to begin by admitting the three most important truths of our existence: that we are so ruined, and so loved, and in charge of so little."

We have to be willing to let go of our burdens completely. To try to let go of trying to manage or figure everything out, let go of trying to force things, and consent to God's good intent for us, and to Jesus' leadership. We are loved!

And this isn't easy. Consent, and surrender to Jesus is a challenge, because most of us (I am going to assume) were raised to be self-sufficient people, who were taught that it's best not to ask for help. Be strong; learn how to handle it. Don't be a burden to anyone; even if it's God we're burdening!

So this idea of consent and relinquishment of control is difficult for many people, as it has been for me. When I became a Christian as a young adult, I thought the reason Jesus had come was to make me *even better at being self-sufficient!* He offers strength to the weary, right? But I didn't realize that to be truly strong in the Lord meant letting go of *my way of trying to manage life*, and letting Jesus lead.

So, Jesus says, come. Take my yoke, leave yours behind. Be yoked with me. Learn from me. Come with me on a journey of discovery, and receive a lightness of being. Let me lead you to green pastures, and quiet waters. And when the journey leads through dark valleys, don't freak out; I am with you. This, too, shall pass, and you shall emerge on the other side of the valley in a spacious place.



The invitation here is to let Jesus, our Good Shepherd lead us. Not just to the next activity, but to a spacious place where we can breathe and be refreshed. Where we can remember that he is with us and be comforted.

The Psalm ends beautifully and with a wonderful image: surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..." The Hebrew could be translated this way: "Surely goodness and kindness shall dog me all my days." Imagine that. Every moment of life, God is hounding us, pursuing us with goodness and kindness. What kind of God is that?

Song: Come to Me, O Weary Traveler. Hear this as the invitation to communion this morning.