

Today in our Lenten series, Pause, we will take a look at that most beloved of all Psalms, Psalm 23. This is a psalm that comforts in many ways and particularly through the image of a table. Gathering around a table can bring both good and bad memories. Some memories may even be awkward. Kind of like this table memory.

[Show Video]

Unlike this ill-prepared dinner guest, Psalm 23 is a hymn that describes in detail God's preparation of a table. Growing up in a church, it didn't take long to commit this psalm to memory. Especially since I had to memorize it as part of my confirmation class. But it was an easy ask because I love this Psalm!

Just look at all of the images packed into these mere 6 verses. Do you have a favorite? I'll tell you mine when we get to it. This beloved psalm is a must at a celebration of life, always in the King James Version. And I love that people aren't shy about saying it with whoever is reading it. There is just something about a community gathered, sharing words like this that makes any heart joyful.

It is also read by some churches as part of their communion liturgy. To read this affirmation of God's presence with David like a shepherd before a table where bread is broken and cup is shared, what could be more appropriate? And thinking about this psalm during Lent provides us the opportunity to consider some new meanings as we make the journey through this season of reflection.

Psalm 23 consists of 55 Hebrew words. In Hebrew, the center of the psalm is the 28<sup>th</sup> word which is "you" "You are with me." You being the Lord. And this psalm is framed by 2 references to the Lord. At the beginning, "The Lord is my Shepherd" and at the end, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord".

Those hearing this when it was first written would not have associated the word "shepherd" with those smelly sheep keeping guys we think of. A "Shepherd" in that time we linked to a

king or ruler. One anointed to watch over and protect the people of his realm. Psalm 23 is indeed referring to the Lord as a ruler.

This poem shifts beautifully from image to image, from literary move to literary move. In verses 1-3 we get a picture of God's role as a shepherd. Tending or making us lie down in green pastures. Leading or leading us beside still waters and paths of righteousness. Feeding us or restoring our souls. Verse 3 says "He restores my soul". Nefesh is the Hebrew word used for soul. It translates into life or life breath. So in Hebrew verse 3 would read, "My life He brings back." It's like someone who almost stops breathing, is revived and brought back to life.

With a psalm that offers so much affirmation of God's sustaining and shepherding presence, its not a surprise to see why it would be so familiar and so beloved. In verse 4 we take a turn in the imagery. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley." The Hebrew word for darkest valley is tsalmaveth and can be translated as "total darkness". David is acknowledging that even when paths are not the ones we want to be on, God is present.

In verse 5 we turn to the image of a table and God's hospitality. Then the psalm concludes with a simple yet bold statement of faith. One that gives assurance that God's presence is with David and us.

Let's pause in the first part of verse 6. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me" (Repeat) This is my favorite image of Psalm 23! In their commentary on Psalms Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr. have this to say about this part of verse 6. David "thought he was being pursued by dangers and threats, but in fact it was the providential goodness of God that...had been following him...chasing after him. The alternative life made possible by such divine pursuit concerns the generous God of creation (his goodness) and the faithful God of covenant (fidelity)." This was "the subjects companion all along the way." Rather than us seeking God's goodness and mercy, the psalms reverses things. God's goodness and mercy find us.

Today we will look at 3 translations and a paraphrase of Psalm 23:5. Think about the ways they invite you to reflect on the table God has set before you.

From Robert Alter's *The Hebrew Bible* translation: "You set out a table before me in the face of my foes. You moisten my head with oil, my cup overflows."

From Pamela Greenberg's translation, *The Complete Psalms* "You spread a table before me in the face of my greatest fears."

From the CEB: "You set a table for me right in front of my enemies. You bathe my head in oil; my cup is so full it spills over!"

And from *The Message* by: "You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing."

The three translations describe the others joining the table in similar ways. "in the face of my foes", "right in front of my enemies." Think about when you take communion. Do you share the Lord's supper with someone who you consider an enemy? In verse 5 God is inviting us to sit with everyone, even those who are enemies. With the Pamela Greenberg translation, we are even invited to sit with people and things we are most afraid of. Once we are seated, blessings flow. We are anointed with oil. We can be confident in God's abiding goodness and merciful presence.

So consider yourself invited in this fourth week of Lent to pause with this psalm of trust. To think about the tables that have been set before you. Maybe a communion table where you are invited to remember the words of institution by Jesus. Do this in remembrance of me. Don't you think when God invites us to a table it's going to be one of grace, love, peace, and joy? And because of that, we need to remember we are at God's table, not ours.

Let's look again at the middle of the psalm, the 28<sup>th</sup> word "you" and the phrase, "you are with me". What made David say this? Think about David's life to this point. Think of how God's presence has been a part of his life as a shepherd turned king leading him, as a broken sinner

restoring him, as a fugitive escaping mad King Saul comforting him, as a shepherd preparing him to take on Goliath, and as the chosen son anointing him. David wants the hearer of this psalm to focus on these things.

When I look at Psalm 23 closely, I see three questions to address: What is the promise, what is the invitation, and what is the challenge.

First the promise. It's right in the middle of our psalm. The promise of God's presence, God's protection, and God's guidance. The first 2 verses seem to be a product of stories passed down from generation to generation. Stories about a God who always provides, who's always present. How do you create awareness of the presence of God in your day-to-day life. Who are the people in your life who need to feel God's presence. Who will you pray for? Who will you tend to? Can your presence be comforting to someone else? Can someone's presence be a comfort to you?

Next the invitation. That's something I see in verse 2 where God leads us to restful waters. This is an invitation to slow down, to pause, to rest both body and soul. There's a wonderful book for children about meditation and mindfulness called "Sitting Still Like a Frog" by Eline Snel. One chapter is called "The Conveyor Belt of Worries." What a fitting description of worry. How can we meaningfully sit in God's presence when our mind and bodies are tight with worry, anxiety, and fears? We need to find the still waters of God's word and prayer that will restore our souls.

Perhaps this is also an invitation for us to be present with others who need our care. Who are those people? What are you going to do about it?

Finally, the challenge. Can we face enemies, foes, and fears at the table? Remember that God is present at that table too. What if you tried to sit with those from diverse denominations and even religions? In her blog called Edible Theology, Kendall Vanderslice talks about an annual brunch in Charleston, SC called Spirited Brunch. Churches and other religious communities open their doors and offer foods that represent their communities. This has become a wonderful opportunity for diverse groups who once might have considered each other enemies to come

together and socialize. Kendall talks about all the cultural foods presented on that day. From places like West Africa and Latin America. Greek Orthodox, Baptists, and Episcopal Churches. She says “We will taste the hospitality of Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, and Baha’i communities; we will enter the doors of Mother Emanuel AME – a community still so committed to hospitality that they will open their doors to hundreds of strangers on this day.”

What an event. How could we offer opportunities for those who disagree to sit together at a table? How would our divisions weaken if we could find a way to have healthy dialogue with each other. Perhaps it would be a way, as Pamela Greenberg said, “to face our fears.” When we remember the affirmation that God is in the business of being present and restoring souls, it raises a question. Who would be on God’s guest list at your table? (Repeat)

This week’s spiritual practice is one we talked about in a sermon a little while back. It’s quite beautiful, so I don’t think it will hurt to talk about it again. This is a spiritual practice created by St. Ignatius of Loyola. The practice is made up of a few very simple steps. It connects to the heart of Psalm 23, God’s presence with us. With the Examen we discuss the good and bad things of a day and end with what we are looking forward to in the next day.

In teaching children this practice, roses, thorns, and buds have been used. The roses are the good things that happen to us in a day. The thorns are the bad things that happen. The buds are the things we look forward to.

This practice can be done alone or with a friend. Step one, you sit comfortably in silence or in a simple affirmation like “God, I’m here; it’s me”. Let’s try that.

Step two, we spend a few moments reviewing the events of the day.

Step three, we deepen that review, especially the good and bad things. The consolations and the desolations. Where did you experience God’s love? Where did you not feel God’s presence. Where would you want a do over? Then ask for God’s grace and healing for those moments.

Step four. Look to the next day. Express to God, your hopes for tomorrow. For opportunities to share God’s light and love with one another.

I hope you will give this a try and let me know how it went for you.

Psalm 23. As psalm of comfort. A psalm of beautiful imagery. A reminder that “you” aka God are with us. A reminder that Gods goodness and mercy following us always. A challenge to face our enemies without fear. A promise of God’s abiding presence in our lives, no matter how dark the road ahead may seem. Let’s dig deep and think about the faces God wants at our table and let’s be bold enough to invite them.