

**Psalm 23** (KJV)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

<sup>3</sup> He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

## Preparing A Table

When I was growing up, our family shared devotions together almost every morning. Before departing for school or work, we would gather in the living room and share a scripture passage, devotional reading, and prayer time together. While we gathered consistently, the content of our gathering would change from season to season, so as to keep the six of us engaged. And there were seasons when we would abandon the devotional readings for the purpose of spending time memorizing scripture. Of course, Psalm 23 is the first passage of scripture I can remember memorizing. Not unlike many persons my age and older, reciting the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm from memory was expected at funerals and memorial services, and often as a part of the quarterly communion liturgy of that era. One was expected to be able to recite this psalm just as easily as saying the Lord's Prayer in unison.

Memorization did not come particularly easy to me. So, a mechanism that I used to help in that process was to visualize the scenes being described by the words, like I was watching a movie and giving verbal descriptions. Well, that was easy with the beginning of this psalm:

1. ***The Lord is my shepherd....*** we hear a lot in the scripture about shepherds and their relationship with sheep, so this was easy as we were setting the scene for the Psalm.
2. ***The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*** Well that makes sense, because it was the shepherd's job, and in the best interest of the shepherd, to provide for the needs of the sheep.
3. ***He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*** Ah, that sounds lovely: lots to eat, and plenty to drink.
4. ***He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*** God desires for us to be whole, and will lead us in that quest, as we represent and serve God in the world. For someone as directionally challenged as I am, my

mental image was one of many paths marked with an abundance of signage, so I could identify God's paths!

5. ***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.*** Suddenly in my mind, the path became very dark and foreboding, somewhat reminiscent of the forest path on the Wizard of OZ, where the trees interacted with the character in a less-than-charitable way! But the Good Shepherd was still there, with the staff of protection at the ready.
6. ***Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies*** – now this is where my young imagination went a bit astray. In my mind's eye, I saw invading armies in every direction. But in the middle of their advance, God had prepared a banquet table...just for me! And while I ate, those armies kept a safe distance at God's command.
7. ***thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*** So, now the imagery becomes more concrete. It was easy to picture an anointing, and a crude ceramic cup brimming over with liquid.
8. ***Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*** By the time I reached this last line, the imagery was no longer needed, for I was in the memorization home-stretch!

It was not until at least 40 years later that someone suggested for me a different image for our theme verse for today ~ ***Thou preparest a table in the presence of mine enemies.*** This suggestion was for a long banquet table at which all of the "enemies" were seated together! What kind of peaceful provision would this be? Isn't it bad enough that we need to spend holidays with family members with whom we would not dare to discuss politics or religion. But now God seats us at the same table ***with*** our enemies?...those who would do us harm?...those who would defeat us?...those who may hate us? There is a disconnect between the rest of the psalm and this disturbing image!

You have probably heard or read this story before, but it is worth repeating. It seems that the traffic light had turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the traffic lights, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, made several crude hand gestures, screaming obscenities in frustration, as she had missed her chance to get through the intersection, dropping her cell phone and spilling her purse while slamming on the brakes. As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands help up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell. After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, giving the guy in front of you the finger,

and cursing at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk, so naturally... I assumed you had stolen the car."

Like my new image of the table God prepares for us, this story contains quite a disconnect between the signage on the car and the behavior of the driver! It is incongruous, messy, misleading, and even dangerous.

Perhaps that is exactly the message God needs us to receive. There are many times in real life when circumstances, relationships, and perceptions are incongruous, messy, misleading, and even dangerous. But God is still with us ~ in the darkest valley, in the presence of death, and when our enemies are right across the table. That God continues to provide for our needs, guide us along the way, and sustain us for eternal love. An unhurried God is present with us in the good times AND the difficult times, and invites us to be radically present with one another in the same way.

The questions that we must ponder are:

- ✦ ***Have we become too busy to be really and authentically present with one another?***
- ✦ Especially in the difficult times, are we willing to step outside our comfort zone in order to share sacred presence with the hurting, the hating, the damaged, and the desperate?
- ✦ What would Jesus do?
- ✦ How can you picture Jesus responding to the broken and the hurting?

I am not Jesus, and you are not Jesus. But we follow the Christ who was willing to give so much for us. He prepares many tables before us. In the images of our minds, let's join Jesus at the table prepared for us, and them ~~ for us all. Let's sing together. . .

SINGING – vs. 2 of "Come and Find a Quiet Center"

For the times when we have put the to-do list  
before reaching out to others . . . forgive us.  
For the times when we isolated ourselves  
to "just push through it" . . . forgive us.  
Help us find the place of balance, O God.  
Help us be mindful of our need – and other's need – to be in relationship.  
Help us stop and find that relationship with you  
as you invite us to beautiful and serene moments of life.  
In this moment we hear your promise:  
"There is a place for you, and plenty to go around."  
You do not ask us to work to earn a place at your table.  
We are your children,  
and that comes with a never-ending invitation to the table of your grace.  
Amen.