

TABLE SETTINGS

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Psalm 23

It is with great sadness that I must inform you of a loss in our church this week—a loss that affects every one of us at a gut level. A key component of our church is no longer with us. This week, the kitchen refrigerator stopped working. That's right, that glass-fronted monstrosity lost it's cool. We came in on Wednesday and found it in the kitchen, on the floor, not moving. We called in the technicians. They worked valiantly to save it. There was nothing they could do. It was the compressor. We had to pull the plug.

They called me in to maybe say a few words over the fridge. I considered the situation—this defunct refrigerator full of warm food. I opened my bible to the Gospel of John, to the chapter which tells of the death of Lazarus. Lazarus' body had been placed in a cave. Jesus arrives and stands before the cave and commands, *Take away the stone*. Lazarus' sister explains that Lazarus has been in the cave deceased for four days now. She echoes what we were experiencing in that kitchen when she says, *Lord, by this time he stinketh*.

This refrigerator has been vital to the life of this congregation. It stores food for our meals. It preserves the juice we use for the sacrament of communion. It holds flowers for our decorations. How many of you have left a casserole in the refrigerator for someone else to pick up later? How many of you have stored a birthday cake in the church fridge because you didn't have room at home? But now it is gone. In the words of Shakespeare, this beloved refrigerator has shuffled off this mortal evaporation coil.

When a person dies, they are sent to the morgue and placed in a refrigerator of sorts. This week we were forced to face an existential crisis: Where you store a dead refrigerator?

Our refrigerator is still in the kitchen. Some people say a dead refrigerator is frightening. I say no. It's the working refrigerators that give me the chills.

All jokes aside, we intend to replace the failed fridge as soon as possible. Some of you may question the necessity of getting a new fridge. But we have to. We are Presbyterians. We are the frozen chosen. Unfortunately, this was an unexpected expense for our church and if you would like to donate to the fridge fund, we will gladly accept checks, credit cards, or cold cash.

If we were to hold a funeral for the dead fridge, we would no doubt read from Psalm 23. You've likely heard this psalm read at every funeral you have ever attended. It is without a doubt one of the most beautiful passages of writing in any language. It tells of God's loving mercy for God's people.

Psalm 23 is among other things an expression of pain. It is clear that the writer (the psalmist) has experienced a personal tragedy or has been part of a communal or national tragedy. Maybe the psalmist survived a terrible illness or the death of a loved one. Maybe their land has been invaded, their leaders killed, their home destroyed. The psalm is a testimony that even in the face of pain and tragedy that God is present.

Psalm 23 hits us with its use of powerful imagery. The images are simple, everyday, common even—a shepherd, pasture, water, valley, staff, table, house. The psalm begins and ends with a reference to God. It starts with *the Lord is my shepherd* and ends with *I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever*. In between, the writer takes us down to the darkest valley and then brings us up to a feast.

We first read that familiar phrase *The Lord is my shepherd*. The people of the day would easily have grasped this image. Shepherds were everywhere. They care for sheep; they protect their sheep from predators; they make sure the sheep have land to graze on and access to water. If a shepherd is neglectful, his sheep may die.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. In Hebrew, this word *want* should be translated as *lack, to be needing*. The psalmist is saying that because the Lord is his shepherd, he lacks for nothing; he shall not be in want. Here at the beginning of the psalm, God is present and abundance is implied.

If the Lord is a shepherd, then the 'I' in the psalm is must be a sheep. The shepherd leads the sheep to rest in green pastures of new grass. The shepherd guides the sheep to quiet places to drink where there is no danger of being swept away by rushing waters. The shepherd provides food and water and rest and furthermore *he restores my soul*. A better translation of *soul* would be *life*—"He renews my life." In God we can catch our breath and get our life back.

The shepherd leads the sheep *on right paths for his name's sake*. The shepherd has a stake in the game. He is conscious of his reputation. If a shepherd were to lead his sheep down a dangerous path, say, a rocky ledge, and if the sheep should fall and die, then the reputation of the shepherd would suffer. God leads the psalmist on right paths for God's own reputation. God wants to be a god who ensures that all are protected and cared for. None can be lost, neglected, or ignored.

In the next section there is a shift in voice. The psalmist is still 'I' but God now becomes 'you.' Previously, the psalmist said, *He leads me in right paths*, but now he

says, *you are with me*. The level of intimacy between the psalmist and God is increasing.

In the King James version of the Bible from 1611, we find the words of the psalm that are burned into our consciousness: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*. This reference to death is one of the reasons this psalm is read at funerals. A more accurate translation however would be “darkest valley.” Death is certainly implied in this place of darkness. As we read today, *even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil*. Because the psalmist is traveling with God even through this dark, steep-sided ravine where danger threatens around every turn, the psalmist is not afraid. He knows he is with God and God pledged to lead him on the right path. Remember, God's reputation is at stake here.

The psalmist adds, *your rod and your staff, they comfort me*. A shepherd carries a staff which has several purposes. The staff is a defensive weapon against predators. The shepherd uses the staff to negotiate rough terrain. The staff is also used to guide the sheep and often the shepherd needs to get aggressive to move the sheep along. It helps to have a staff to do just that. A shepherd with a staff is ready for work. That is comforting to the sheep.

The psalmist' journey with the shepherd has descended into a dark valley but now is heading out, back to the light. The psalmist exclaims, *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*. The psalmist is no longer a sheep, and God has set a table for him. Just as the psalmist was comforted by the presence of the shepherd's staff, this table is set in the presence of enemies. Who are these enemies? Is the table set in a field before an opposing army? God's protection does not mean that the psalmist is removed to a secure, isolated location. Life goes on and the psalmist is in the midst of it. But protected.

The psalmist then says about God, *you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows*. Anointing is royal language. Remember how young David (who was a shepherd) was anointed by the prophet Samuel. Others. This table is a royal feast. It's not just bread and cheese. It is a banquet. Sitting at the table, one discovers a never-ending cup to drink from.

Finally, in the last line of the psalm, the psalmist reaches *the house of the Lord*—his destination. He proclaims, *surely goodness and mercy¹ shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long*.

¹ Surely goodness and mercy need to be retranslated. The word surely should be ‘for’—it is a simple preposition. Goodness is the Hebrew word *tov*. It simply means good. Mercy is the word *hesed* which is better understood as steadfast love or covenant love. In Christian lingo we would say *ἀγάπη*. For good and love shall follow me all the days of my life—in other words forever. And I shall make my home in the house of the Lord for all times to come.

Psalm 23 is important to us as Christians not only for what it says about God but also for the way that its images have been appropriated by Christian tradition. Jesus himself uses the image of a shepherd in his teachings and parables. He even lays claim to the title Good Shepherd. In the Gospel of John Jesus says, *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.* In Psalm 23 the shepherd leads the sheep to still waters. Jesus calms a storm. The shepherd leads the sheep down right paths. Jesus says 'follow me.' God prepares a table. And Jesus is known for eating with sinners. As Christians, a central moment of our faith is the Passover meal, the last supper. From that emerges our sacrament of communion. Finally, the psalmist desires to reside in the house of the Lord. Jesus directs his followers to inhabit God's kingdom.

Psalm 23 is not just an eternal expression of one person's faith in God, it also a roadmap for the Christian faith. The shepherd not only cares for the sheep, the shepherd gives his life for his flock. That sacrifice throws open for us the doors to God's house forever.

As Christians, we can find great comfort in this beautiful psalm. It is an enduring testament of God's love. In this season following Easter, we can also give thanks for the sacrifice and gift of the one we call the good shepherd. His death is a gift of life.

Amen.