



House Dweller – Touchpoint for May 4, 2022

*Psalm 23 (ESV) 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 paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
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
forever.*

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“The Lord is my Shepherd.”

It's always risky, I suppose, to speak about something so familiar. The 23rd Psalm. It has to rank right up there with the Lord's Prayer and John 3:16 as far as well-known Bible passages go.

People ask me to read it at almost every funeral I do. But I started thinking, why wait for a funeral to hear it? I mean, these last two years with Covid have felt like we've all been walking through the valley of the shadow of death. And it makes me think that the valley of the shadow of death isn't at the time of impending death, but really is all of life. Every day is lived in the shadow of death. It looms over all of life. And for those of us with health issues, that shadow can at times appear lengthened and darker than at other times.

Every day is lived within the valley of the shadow of death. And so for most of the world, we live in denial of it. We build structures and belief systems to ignore it or defeat it. We don't talk about it, and when we do, it's often in hushed tones.

But the psalmist doesn't call us to deny it, but to acknowledge it and embrace it. Rather than live in denial of it, this Psalm directs us to times and places that give us comfort in the face of it. This psalm directs us to where one finds life in the valley of the shadow of death.

And so, when I read this Psalm this week, I started thinking about this poem/prayer in a different sort of way. I mean, shepherds have never been a big part of my life – as a matter of fact, I've never met one. Though I did take a bunch of pictures of them when I was in Israel and Jordan a few years ago.

One was driving his sheep around in the back of his pick-up truck. Ahhh, shepherding in the 21st century.

“The Lord is my shepherd. He drives me in his truck to faucet-filled water troughs, in the shade of prefabricated buildings.” OK, it doesn't quite have the same ring to it, does it?

But it got me to thinking. How does one hear this Psalm in our present day? Is it simply an old relic of a bygone era that demands an understanding of – or a return to – a time and a culture so vastly different from ours?

So often, when I've heard this passage talked about, I feel like I'm being given a detailed history lesson in 1st century sheep herding... which, if I can be totally frank, bores me to death.

So how does one hear this anew?

Let me try to come at it from a different perspective, a different place... and hopefully this will work for you.

This psalm is a description of my life. Not so much a description of the places I have gone in my life, but rather a description of the people in my life.

There are people who have been green pastures in my life... who have allowed me to lie down, let go, find rest and respite in their presence. Not demanding anything of me other than to simply be.

There are people who have been still waters... who have been depths of wisdom and a place of calm in the turbulence of life.

People... who have restored my soul.

People who have been with me in the valley of the shadow of death, when that shadow loomed large. And I realized that the Divine Mystery, and the people it sent, didn't just appear in times of trouble, but were walking with me every step of the way.

There are people who have had my back, invited me over for dinner, prepared a table for me – when I colored outside of institutional lines, ruffled some feathers, and disturbed those church leaders who looked at the church more as a safe haven for their careers than a place of mission.

These people, and others like them, have overflowed my cup of life with goodness and mercy, and grace and forgiveness.

Is this what the Psalmist means when he says, “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*”?

One commentary I read said that the word we translate as ‘follow’ is really more like the word ‘pursue,’ as in ‘relentlessly pursue.’

This sense of a God, the Divine Mystery, as one who is constantly on our tail. Never letting go, never easing up... sending people into our lives.

This God, this Divine Mystery, hasn't just pursued me in the past, it continues to this present day. It isn't just in the past it has happened – it's happening now.

I had coffee the other day with a gentleman who has a deep sense of wisdom and calmness about him. Conversation with him is like drinking from a deep well of grace.

I have another friend who overflows my cup of grace with her interpretation of scripture, capturing and seeing things I would never think of in a million years.

There is this group I sit down with every week on Wednesday, and this time together. It is like a green pasture, where restoration of soul is a constant event.

I am forever being led – or maybe it's relentlessly pursued – by the Divine Mystery. I don't know, maybe it's both.

So what about you?

Who are the green pastures of your life? Who are the still waters? Who has restored your soul? Who has led you in paths of goodness? Been with you in the shadows of life?

Who's had your back and sat at table with you when the world turned on you?

Who's filled your cup to overflowing?

Who has done those things and is doing them for you?

Because you see, to identify those people, those times, and those places... is to realize that you have already been dwelling in the House of the Lord your whole life... forever...

Because you see, the House of the Lord is not a future place, but a place you've been living in all along, are still living in, and always will be living in...

Here and now, and FOREVER!!!

Amen.

... OK, so let's go through this again. Get comfortable, close your eyes – only this time I want you to see people in your life either *in* those places mentioned, or *as* those places:

Psalm 23 *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;*

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

He leads me beside still waters;

³ *He restores my soul.*

*He leads me in paths of righteousness
for His name's sake.*

⁴ *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

I fear no evil;

for You are with me;

*Your rod and Your staff,
they comfort me.*

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil,
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me
all the days of my life;
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Be Still

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

You Lord Are In This Place

(Keith Duke)

You Lord are in this place.

Your presence fills it.

Your presence is peace.

2)...my heart, 3)...my mind, 4)...my life

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Shepherd Me, O God

(Marty Haugen)

Refrain: Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.

- 1 God is my shepherd, so nothing shall I want, I rest in the meadows of faithfulness and love,
I walk by the quiet waters of peace. [Refrain]
- 2 Gently you raise me and heal my weary soul, you lead me by pathways of righteousness and
truth, my spirit shall sing the music of your name. [Refrain]
- 3 Though I should wander the valley of death, I fear no evil, for you are at my side,
your rod and your staff, my comfort and my hope. [Refrain]
- 4 You have set me a banquet of love in the face of hatred, crowning me with love beyond my
power to hold. [Refrain]
- 5 Surely your kindness and mercy follow me all the days of my life;
I will dwell in the house of my God forevermore. [Refrain]

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Taize Reflections)

Benediction

May God Keep and Bless You

(Marty Haugen)

May God keep and bless you, and nothing distress you. May God guard and guide you and friends walk beside you. May God's arms surround you and fear not confound you. May God's light shine through you and night not subdue you. As you sleep and wake may your prayers arise as love songs for God, whose love never dies, whose love never dies.