

Psalm 23

23:1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

23:2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

23:3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

23:4 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.

23:5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

23:6 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.

You may love today's text. It might bring you untold comfort, and transport you to wonderful memories.

You may loathe this text – “This is what we hear at funerals and executions, and please, can we just listen to something less depressing?”

Or maybe, because you are not a straight-white male living in a first-century agrarian environment, it's hard to resonate with the image of shepherd, not to mention all those He's, and dark valleys, and rods and staffs, and anointing oil.

And hey, there are introverts among us, can we slow down on all these dinner invitations? Just how many of our enemies are present, and how close are they sitting?

And by the way, Psalm 23 makes its way into the lectionary on a regular basis. Do you think that maybe we could explore some less familiar passages?

I get it. Familiar scriptures, just like familiar hymns, images, prayers, and other rituals can elicit a range of emotions and feelings depending on who you are and how these texts have informed your life experiences.

And I want to tell you, it's okay to resonate with some texts and not resonate with others. You are all smart people with strong, valid, and unique opinions. And I believe we worship a God who is big enough, strong enough, unique enough, and humble enough to let us wrestle with, question, even disagree with a two-thousand-year-old collection of documents written by a group of people who are not God, but

rather, are people just like us. And I believe I can say this to you, and still be authentic in stating that the humanness of our scriptures makes them no less important, no less sacred, no less special, and no less valuable in seeking to understand the divine.

And I am sorry. I have rambled. Where I'm trying to go with all of this pretext is to tell you, "I don't really care if you love or hate today's text." Regardless of how you feel about Psalm 23, or any text for that matter, every text has the potential to hold value for us.

I want to ask you to view today's text, and all texts we read, as a gift.

Mother's Day and Father's Day, and graduations are on the horizon, and I am reminded of good gifts and not-so-good gifts. Sometimes, many times, we receive gifts that are very thoughtful and useful. Other times, not so much.

It's been forty years, and my brothers and I will never live down giving our mother a Jane Fonda workout suit – it was a literal sweat suit made out of plastic. And we gave this monstrosity to a phenomenal person whom we love and adore.

But even bad gifts usually have good sentiment. We're human. And sometimes what we give, be it our actions, our words, our time, our treasures, are not always received as we intended. But sometimes, we get it right. Sometimes we give in a way such that our praises make everyone, especially the intended receiver, better.

You may not like Psalm 23. That's okay. I do, however. I really like this Psalm. And here's why. One day, a Psalmist – that's just a fancy term from someone who offered their deepest, most insanely-human and

most insanely-vulnerable thoughts to God, and managed to get published – one day, a Psalmist wrote about what gave them comfort.

This person imagined God as a shepherd. One that kept them safe. One that guided them through every difficulty in life. And this person speaks of their close relationship with God. God's not a Sir or a Madam they address in a distant letter; God is a You: someone I'm addressing right now, and always. This is personal and intimate.

I don't believe the point of Psalm 23 is for us to mold God into the image of shepherd, though we certainly can if we want to. I believe the point of Psalm 23 is to begin a conversation about the nature and character of God. I believe Psalm 23 tells others that God is right here. And that God's gonna keep being right here. And for this writer, the image of shepherd captures such a God.

And what's next? What do we do with this? Each of us is invited to find an image(s) that works for us. And in so doing, to continue a dialogue, a holy dialogue, of psalmists, some published, some self-published, some not, who seek to explore, discover, and share this good God of ours.

Why do I like Psalm 23? Psalm 23 invites me to imagine how I see a comforting, protecting, present, prescient God. And then Psalm 23 says to me, "Well, tell me, Bob, what do you think?!? Let's hear about this God. Let's start a dialogue!"

So, Millbrook Baptist Church...if I may be so bold:

The Lord is my German Shepherd, I shall not want.
She does not let me lie down in green pastures, because pastures are for playing.

She leaps into still water; She wags her tail; She loves me. Always.
She restores my soul.

The Lord is my daughter, I shall not want.
One daughter makes me explore green pastures, because clovers are cool, Daddy!
Another splashes in still bath water, and so does her duckie. A third hums a familiar tune about a fountain flowing deep and wide.
They love me. Always.
They restore my soul.

My God is an energetic puppy and a happy little girl.
And when I'm in Her presence, I don't dwell on the things I've made weighty for poor reasons.
I dwell on Her.
Her name.
Her essence.
Her spark.
The spark She put in me, and you, and all of us.
And I don't need a GPS to know I've been led on right paths.

The Lord is my partner. It's fun to do life with Her!
She listens.
She digs my weird.
She loves me, even when the grass is brown, and the water is boiling.
Man, am I ever lucky!

The Lord is my Flora. And Frannie. And Frida. Three flamingo lovies.
And I shall not want.

Even in the darkest part of night, even when my tummy aches, even when Daddy makes me wear the purple shoes, even when the thunder claps, and the winds howl...

I fear no evil.

For They are with me; your soft fur, and your pretty pink beak, the worn parts that nuzzle against my cheek, they comfort me.

You've got me. Always.

The Lord is my Mother; I have not wanted, nor shall I want.

Sure, there are dark times, and awkward times, and scary times, and High School...ugh. And 2020. And 2021 for that matter.

I fear no evil.

For you are with me;

You listen to me, you guide me, you see me, you know me, you say just what I need to hear.

Your gifts they comfort me.

You've got me. Always.

And you, beautiful woman, wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, partner, you have this way of making tables out of the simplest things.

A homemade treat, a checkered tablecloth, a sunflower in an old Sun-Drop bottle; your grace, your hospitality...

Even my enemies say, "Let's eat and let's be reconciled."

So...you anoint us with your hugs, and maybe some Purell, and a feast for the soul.

And we are full. Always.

And because I know you, God – the one who leaps like a puppy, and squeals like a child, and steadies me like a life partner, and comforts me like a lovie, and loves me like a mamma – Because I know you, God,

surely good things – grace, and mercy, and love – surely these things are gonna follow me all the days of my life.

And I will dwell in your house, and you in mine. Always.

Millbrook Baptist Church, I've read enough scriptures, and I've heard enough names for God to discern that we belong to a wonderful Creator. One who loves us. Always. Often times, some of the texts we read can be clumsy, or dated, or human, or even wrong. But good or bad, connected or disconnected, every written word reminds us of something really, really important: God made people, not words. And our role, the purpose of very lives, is to help make this good God of ours apparent in the places where our words fail to give Them adequate justice.

And there's good news, Millbrook. No matter how monumental such a calling may feel, no matter how hard life gets, that Shepherd, who also moonlights as a German Shepherd, and little girl, and a flamingo lovie, and a mamma, and a life partner, She's got us. Always!

May it always, always, be so.

Amen.