

Psalm 23 (JPS Tanakh):

Pew Bible, page 501

23:1 The LORD is my shepherd; I lack nothing.

23:2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me to waters in places of repose.

23:3 He renews my life. He guides me in right paths as befits His name.

23:4 Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff – they comfort me.

23:5 You spread a table before me in full view of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my drink is abundant.

23:6 Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for many long years.

Sermon: The Space-Making God

I have a confession to make. Clutter makes me feel closed in, trapped even.

If there are too many bills, or loose papers, or trinkets scattered on my desk, I can't compose a single thought. Not one. It's the same with my desktop and laptop computers. Even virtual files, minding their own business, scattered about organically on my display, confined to a twenty-inch screen, hem me in.

And some days, I don't feel like I can take a single step without some monster or another invading my space: We have closets in our home, but I don't remember the last time our family's shoes, coats, hats, bookbags, or accessories resided in them – they seem to feel most comfortable by the front door, or lurking on the stairway to be tripped over with the lights off in the middle of the night, or my favorite, strewn across the bathroom floor. Because, really, nothing's more soothing than stepping over stinky, sweaty socks and sneakers to hop into a hot bath. There are dishes, and silverware, and Tupperware (ugh!) that gravitate to anyplace but the sink or dishwasher. And y'all, I am just embarrassed by the state of my car. Yesterday, I realized the contents of my automobile included, among other things, one stray soccer shin guard, a plastic sand pale, a few magic markers, one widowed green mitten, three large sticks and two dandelions my daughters procured from the soccer field, seventeen receipts from Aldi, a French fry from sometime last decade, an old Millbrook worship bulletin. And the reason I know off of this is because I was looking for a quarter to stick in the grocery cart, and somehow, I didn't have one of those!

I feel this same anxiety when I turn left or right out of the church parking lot each day; at least twice a week I say, "How can there be SO many cars on one road?" And I mean, really, honestly, are you trying to tell me there are three functional lanes on each side of Falls of the Neuse Road?!? I'm not sure a matchbox car would feel safe in such a configuration. Choose that middle lane at your own peril!

At the grocery store, I sometimes wonder if the person beside or behind or in front of me is inspecting their produce or me, because they are equidistant from us both. And someday, I wonder if they think I am the cart return, because I swear there's not an inch of distance between their cart and my backside. And then there was the summer I lived in

London, and I ventured down to the Underground during morning rush hour. A friend remarked, “It’s the only place in the whole city where even your internal organs don’t have their own space!”

These are rather innocuous examples of space invaders. In addition to the invasion of physical space, too many of our neighbors can’t find space from harassment, or abuse, or marginalization, or dehumanization, and all for reasons as simple as the color of their skin, the language they speak, the God they worship, the culture they bring with them, or the person whom they choose to love. Or how about those neighbors that can never find enough distance from grief, or from the pull of addiction, or from the strain of poverty, or from the weight of illness, or depression, or anxiety? And the space these neighbors need cannot be provided with a simple house-dusting, or a vacuuming, or a trip to the car wash.

Everyone needs space, and lots of it, in lots of different ways, to realize their potential.

Our sacred scriptures, from the outset, tell us of a space-making God. Thanks be to God for the One who creates habitable space out of chaos, who creates space beyond a garden, and beyond imperfection, and beyond catastrophe. And thanks be to God, for an exodus, the salvific act of creating space from Pharaoh’s army, and space to grow into maturity in the wilderness, and space to thrive as a new people in a new land.

Millbrook Baptist Church, ours is a space-making God! This morning, the psalmist reiterates this divine quality with a refreshing twist: God doesn’t just make space. God shares space, too! Best of all, shared spaces create thriving communities.

“Because of our shepherding, space-making God,” the psalmist tells us, “We lack nothing.”

When we chant this psalm, we could be King David on the run from Saul, or we could be a post-exilic writer overwhelmed by a complicated homecoming, or we could even be a neighbor here in Raleigh in 2026.

Because, whether we’re a would-be-king fleeing an aging monarch, or an exile returning home to a desolated land, or a Raleighite, navigating the intricacies of life in 2026, be it staying up two overtimes to watch the Hurricanes, or braving 440 or 540, or just trying to make human contact with a service provider on the phone, we all need nourishment, we all need encouragement, we all need to space to grow.

The Shepherd God offers green-grassy-fields – good for eatin’, or nappin’, or playing, or contemplating, or gathering with friends. And this shepherd offers water in places of repose; that means you can quench your thirst in stillness, not like some marathoner trying to hydrate on the run. Of course, it’s not just physical space – the psalmist knows the Shepherd God also offers counsel and guidance – I have this image of a sturdy oak, the kind you can lean on as you sit in the grass, and enjoy the shade, and find your center.

But even with a belly full of Bermuda grass, and a canteen full of sparkling water, and the sturdiness and renewal of safe and pleasing sleep, the world still gets dark from time to time. Yes, David had his provisions, but he was still stuck in neutral hiding out from King Saul. Yes, the exiles finally returned from Babylon, and they were rebuilding their lives, but the reconstruction of their community was still overwhelming. Even in our own time, we’re navigating the uncertainties

of a polarized world, of an economy that's asks us to do more with less, of an Earth that feels so fractured and complex.

The psalmist, says, "Don't fear this darkness, because there's a presence here." The One who has made a habit out of making space for me, God in the third person, that God is even closer, is even more present right now; in fact, we're talking right now. "You, the Shepherd God, 'You' are with me, and Your rod and Your staff protect me."

God creates space for the psalmist (and you and me, too!) to thrive in every season of life.

But guess what? God shares this space, too. God doesn't clear out space like a greedy developer, enclosing Godself in a gated community, or evicting the people and things that exist within that space. God makes a banquet, for all to see, even our enemies, and there's a chair for everyone. Even better, God gets out the good oil, that's the sweet-smelling stuff, and the fine wine – the cup overflows; hydrated skin and hair; quenched thirst; abundance for every guest. Order what you want, y'all, it's on God's tab!

And in this abundant, communal, shared space, the psalmist has this realization, "Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me all the days of my life." Did you catch that? In the communal, shared, divine, collaborative space, what is good and holy pursues and finds the psalmist (and you and me, too!). With longevity! And the psalmist says, "I am gonna live here, in God's house, for many long years."

I believe Psalm 23 is relevant in multiple contexts: God creates and shares space with God's people. If it's King David, there's an assurance of a kinship where God's people foster a community of faith and

neighboring. God's consistency abides, in the good times and the bad times, too. If the text is an exile setting, God is not only helping the returning exiles to find space in their old land, but God is also cultivating space for a new temple, where God's community can build a future together. And if the psalmist lives today, perhaps God is telling us that new space is being cleared, physically, virtually, emotionally, spiritually for ours to be a banquet community.

I can certainly tell you that ten years ago, I would have never imagined the myriad forms of virtual connection at our disposal, let alone those with green pastures or thirst-quenching waters. And yet, there is God, carving out and sharing space, in good times, and difficult times, too. Zoom grids have become sacred spaces; With Facebook and YouTube, people watch and comment on gatherings from all over the world, and in real time. And yes, a thousand times yes, we value human touch, but texting and FaceTime have opened up new windows of outreach. We travel to untouched places, speak Psalms from our palms. Sure, it's a new frontier, but God's gonna be present in both the darkness and light!

I believe the challenge for us today is two-fold: 1) Seeking to recognize the sacred and life-giving spaces God is making for each of us and 2) Sharing, both individually and collectively, the abundance of these God-given spaces with others.

The great majority of us have our basic provisions met daily – we graze in green pastures, and we drink from still waters. Having been gifted space from such burdens, how might we offer our resources, physical, spiritual, and emotional, to help provide space for neighbors not yet freed from the burdens of poverty?

All of us know how lousy it feels to be burdened by seemingly innocuous space invaders – clutter, the evening commute, balancing our calendars and checkbooks and families, etc. But many of us will never experience first-hand the more painful and traumatic space-invaders: microaggressions, harassment, systemic injustice. What kind of spaces are we willing to help create in our own hearts and minds that generate empathy and grace for our neighbors, and what kind of desire do we have to grow our own banquet tables?

God has gifted this community with SO many special spaces: our campus; our virtual spaces; our windows of worship, formation, fellowship, and community outreach; the hearts and minds of those who gather among us, and today, with special emphasis, a preschool shaping the lives of five generations and their families.

How might we imagine the ways we can reclaim and expand such spaces to help make God’s abundance and love more evident beyond our own walls?

With the psalmist, we acknowledge, “Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue us all the days of our lives.” We also acknowledge that we can never know the full extent, the full grace of green grass and still waters until every neighbor is also pursued with only goodness and steadfast love.

Friends may it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.