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 Good Shepherd Sunday

The Good Shepherd
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;*^[a]

³ *he restores my soul.*^[b]
He leads me in right paths^[c]
for his name's sake.

⁴ *Even though I walk through the darkest valley,*^[d]
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*^[e] *goodness and mercy*^[f] *shall follow me
 all the days of my life,*
*and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 my whole life long.*^[g]

Close your eyes and listen again to the beginning of that passage.
 Listen for one word or phrase that jumps out at you.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;^[a]

³ *he restores my soul.*^[b]

Listen to it again, and ask, what are you saying to me in this passage, God?

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;^[a]

³ *he restores my soul.*^[b]

What we've done is an ancient way
of reading and studying the Bible, called *Lectio Divina*.
The key to it is reading the passage **aloud** 3 times,
and listening for God's word to you.
There's something about hearing the Bible read out loud that makes
It more *powerful and meaningful*.
You can do this with any Bible passage—
so try it sometime!

Psalm 23 centers around this metaphor of *God the Good Shepherd*.
I wonder, have you ever seen *sheep in person*?
The first time I saw sheep was as a kid, on my friend Verna's farm.
They had a bunch of sheep.
And these animals did not impress me, at all.
They were loud, and smelly, and looked a bit aimless, wandering around.
That is, until Verna's Dad called them-- to herd them into the pen.
Now that was a sight to see.
All these sheep, *following the voice of their owner, their shepherd*.

That moment helped me understand Psalm 23, and John 10,
And Jesus' words about the sheep knowing the voice of the Good Shepherd.
Sheep may be simple animals,
But they *know to follow* the voice of their protector.
They know *how to follow* the Shepherd.

The question for us is: Do we?
Do we KNOW TO follow our Good Shepherd?
DO WE FOLLOW our Good Shepherd?
Because that is the way---to green pastures, and still waters, and right paths.
Following the Shepherd is the pathway---*to life*.

Psalm 23 is such a beloved and powerful Psalm.
Do any of you know it from *memory*?
Many people do, even if it's a different version than the one I read.

And most of us have heard it *read aloud before*—
often at *funerals*, for its incredible message of comfort.
And these words might come to your mind during hard times.
Sometimes even people with dementia know this passage,
when their memory fails in every other way, because it is so powerful.

It's one of those Bible verses that *everyone should memorize*.

We hear these words at funerals because this Psalm offers special comfort to those who mourn.

The most famous version of this passage is the *King James Version* which says, *yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...*

In other words, this is peace and comfort for the grieving.

But that phrase can also be translated, *though I walk through the darkest valley*.

So these are also promises

Not just at the time of death, but for *ALL of the dark valleys in life*.

That's what makes this a *UNIVERSAL Psalm*.

It is a message of hope and comfort for people facing any kind of problem.

It is a Psalm for all of life, for all people.

I mean who doesn't need God's *provision and protection*?

Doesn't everyone know what it feels like to be *afraid*? To *doubt*? To *be alone*?

Doesn't everyone need *God's help*?

And we don't just need this as *individuals*, we also need this in *community*, right?

In fact, this Psalm hearkens back to *God's protection and provision* of the Israelites during the 40 years wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt.

When the Psalmist says "*I shall not want*", that word for *want* is the same word in Deuteronomy 2:7, which says

These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.

It reminds us of God's presence in the *cloud* by day, and the *pillar of fire* by night that accompanied the Israelites for 40 years.

It was their physical reminder of God's *constant presence* with them.

To hear the words *I shall not want*, is also powerful,

because we live in a society that *encourages us to want!*

We are told that we should want all kinds of electronics, clothes, food, homes, cars, and more, right?

But like Jesus speaking to the rich young ruler in Luke 18,

When he tells the man there is *one thing you lack*, go and sell everything....

The truth is we don't lack lots of things,
 And there is really just **ONE thing we need**, more than anything else,
 And that one thing is **God**.

We all need God.

And what is this passage saying?
 It's saying that we ***have that one thing---right beside us.***
 We have God.

God is near.

In verse 4, the language shifts from talking ABOUT God the Good Shepherd,
 to talking ***TO God the Good Shepherd.***

From 3rd person to 2nd person—

He says: ***YOU*** are with me, ***YOUR*** rod and staff they comfort me.

In other words, this is a ***personal relationship*** with God.
 Which means this is also a description of Jesus.
 Jesus was called ***Emmanuel***—which means 'God-with-us'.

Theologian Walter Brueggeman says that this is our key to life---
 because God's ***COMPANIONSHIP*** transforms every situation in our lives.
 Walter Brueggeman, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 2, pg. 433.*

Think about that.

How does knowing God as your Good Shepherd. change your life?

And how do you experience God as a constant companion?

How does God help your stress and your pain?

It's amazing to think about, isn't it?

The whole Psalm turns on verse 4: ***You are with me.***

That's the essence of this Psalm—that God is near.

God is not some far off deity who is just watching what's happening here on earth.

God is with us.

We are never alone.

What does that mean to YOU, today?

In verse 5, we see God the Good Shepherd become ***God the Host.***

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

you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

What does this image of God *preparing a table mean to you*?
 Does it mean that you get fed, while your enemies do not?
 Does it mean you are protected from your enemies?

In the Upper Room, Mandy Sayers writes about God preparing a table before us,
 And she imagines God preparing a fancy dinner,
 with white tablecloths and fancy dinnerware.
 And while she feasts, *her enemies are standing against the wall* of the restaurant,
 watching as she eats in front of them.
 Upper Room Disciplines.com, March 15, 2023

But then she asks—does that image make sense for our God?
Or, could the feast be a table, where we are eating WITH our enemies?

I mean what kind of table would *Jesus* set?
Didn't he eat WITH the sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes?
 So what if a table before our enemies,
 means a table *with them*—because all of us are broken and fallen,
 and we are all an enemy to someone else!
What would that kind of table mean to you?

What if this is a way to *redefine the meaning of enemy and friend*?
 And what if God's table is big enough for all?
 What if the overflowing cup and flowing oil
 mean that *all God's people are welcome* at God's feast?

It makes me think about a very *powerful scene of communion*,
 at the end of the 1985 movie with Sally Field, called *Places in the Heart*.
 The movie is set in 1930's Texas, and Edna is a widow with two small children
 trying to save her farm with the help of a blind boarder and an itinerant black
 handyman. It's a movie about struggle, segregation, poverty, and friendship.

At the end of the movie is a scene in the local church—
 with people from all throughout the movie, dead, and alive,
 taking *communion together, as the choir sings "In the Garden"*.

All the townspeople are in the pews,
 including a woman who died in a tornado, Moses, who fled town,
 and Edna, who passes a communion tray to her deceased husband,
 quietly saying "Peace of God".

And with the same blessing, he hands it to Wylie,
the boy who had accidentally shot him and was then himself shot to death.
After Wylie replies, “Peace of God”, the hymn ends and so does the film.

It's a beautiful scene of *a table set before us in the presence of our enemies*.
Of God's feast—where all are welcome, and all can eat.
It's a *foretaste of the heavenly banquet* that will one day serve us all, together.

You know what?
If we take Psalm 23 seriously,
We start to see that God is our *protector, our provider, and
God is in CONTROL*.

Which is a pretty revolutionary idea, when you really think about it!
I mean, we usually live like we are in control!
And *we are the center of the universe!*

Psalm 23 can re-orient us, you know?

We can move away from the center of our lives, and *put God there--*
Because God is the one who makes all good things happen.
Because God is the one who leads us to green pastures, and still waters,
The one who protects us, and creates that banquet table that is big enough for all.

Could you use a reorientation in your life?

I know I can.

I need God to be the center of my universe.

That's the only pathway to life---the abundant life that Jesus promises in John 10.

Psalm 23 ends with a promise--that God's *goodness and mercy will follow us*.

*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.*

But that word for *follow actually means 'pursue'*.

In other words, God's goodness comes after us.

If we think we can escape the grace of God, we're wrong.

God doesn't just show us the way,
And prepare our way,

God comes after us, when we go our own way!
This is the power of God's love for us---it is a love that *pursues us!*

Friends, that is definitely *Good News Today:*
God is our *Good Shepherd.*
We don't need anything, or anyone else to be the center of our lives.

God protects us and provides for us.
God brings us together around an endless table.
God pursues us with goodness and mercy.
God is always with us.

And for the gift of the Good Shepherd,
All God's people can say, Amen!