



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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He Restores My Soul

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Psalm 16

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters^d
³ he restores my soul.
He leads me in right path
for his name's sake.*

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.*

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 follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

Mark 6: 30- 34

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

The week had been long, hot and demanding. The disciples have been on the road working hard on the mission outing. Traveling around they met their neighbors, healed the sick, preached of the kingdom, and now returned exhausted to rendezvous with Jesus. Given the timing of the excursions, in the early days of Jesus’ ministry with growing popularity in the young rabbi, we would expect some strategist to come and begin planning their next endeavor. An entire kingdom must be built and the world is a needy place. But before the future plans can be mapped out, Jesus intervenes. “Come away” he says, “to an uninhabited place all by yourselves and rest awhile.” Rest and relaxation, this is the invitation by Jesus for the disciples. This is the invitation of Jesus for our lives as

well. The Christian writer, Gordon MacDonald, shares that "God built a rhythm of rest and work into human existence. Rest wasn't meant to be a luxury, but rather a necessity to those who want to have growth and maturity." It doesn't do any good to have a strong body and a weak and shallow soul.

In my own family, I have been surprised at the resistance to rest. When my daughters were young and I would say "it is time for you to take a rest" and they would quickly disagree with me. I could see their heavy eyes and their behavior would indicate the need for rest, but they adamantly protested. If someone came to me and offered to take care of the house while I rested and then said we would go play after my rest I would like that offer. Perhaps there is something innate in us that does not want to give up power.

Jesus was attune to the deeper rest from observing the Sabbath. Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy is number four of the Ten Commandments. **The commandment begins,** *"Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work."* The commandment can sound stern with rules and restrictions. For years the commandment was abused and the people were held hostage with manmade rules for the Sabbath. Yet the intention of the commandment is for our enjoyment. To create a time in our life that opens space for God. We do not have a calendar with days circled to indicate a Sabbath to be observed. Tilden Edwards, a mentor of mine, teaches that we

need to be flexible, to carve out a Sabbath time, a regular rhythm of disciplined spiritual renewal during the week. Sabbath is not about taking a day off but about recalling what God has done for us with knowledge and gratitude for God's activity in the world. Good Sabbaths make good Christians by regularly reminding us of God's creative, liberating, and redeeming presence.

The best part of the Sabbath is spending time with the Lord, the one who is admittedly the Good Shepherd. When Jesus looked out at the people he saw people in need of a shepherd and he assumed this role, echoing the words of Psalm 23 the Lord is My Shepherd. For several weeks in the summer, a group of us have looked at the Psalms during a study we called "Psalms in the Courtyard." Our final class was devoted to Psalm 23 – the most beloved of all the Psalms. One person in our study observed that the Psalm, although just six verses reflects God's abiding presence for our entire life span, womb to tomb. No one in the class knew about being a shepherd, the closest we got was someone who had raised chickens. So we turned to an expert in the field.

Kenneth Bailey is a theologian who lived in Lebanon for 40 years. He watched the shepherds in order to learn about the culture and to learn about his faith. He observed as one shepherd led a flock of 500 sheep by himself. The shepherd had a distinct call and when the sheep heard the call they followed trusting the shepherd would lead them on the right paths. Rain only came two months during the year so it is up to the

shepherd to care for the sheep and lead them to nourishing food and water, ever mindful of the sheep's condition. The shepherd is tough, rugged and devoted to his sheep. He stays with the sheep at all costs, guiding, protecting, and walking with them through the fields. The green pasture is both a place of rest and a place of refreshment. He will guard against predators and thieves as thy rod and staff, they comfort me. Being a shepherd is a dirty and hard job.

The image which stands out the most is "he restores my soul." Sheep wander. When one of the sheep goes too far they will get into trouble by getting stuck in a thicket or under a ledge. Then it will begin to cry out. The good shepherd will hear the cries for help and leave the others to search for the one in trouble. Pulling out the sheep he will find a traumatized sheep unable to return to the others. The sheep will then have to be hoisted on the shepherd's shoulders to be carried back to the flock where it will be restored with the others. This is the devotion of the shepherd for us.

Dee is a friend who experienced the restoration of her soul. Her family experienced the darkest valley as they lost several family members close together. The most traumatic was the loss of her brother in a terrible accident at a young age. The grief was overwhelming. Months passed, and she struggled. One day she met with a priest and poured out her troubles as she was seeking relief. After listening carefully for a while, the priest made a suggestion. Dee, you should read Psalm 23 each day at the beginning and the end of the day. At first Dee was not too thrilled with this advice. How

could words on a page help my broken heart? Yet she followed his advice and she began to find a deeper message than words on a page. Over time the Psalm became for her a prayer and then a healing. Her troubled soul slowly became quieted as she read and prayed the Psalm. She even began to set the psalm to her own words – a true prayer of her heart. What she discovered was that she moved from knowing the words of the Psalm to knowing the comfort of the shepherd.

In the original Hebrew of Psalm 23, there are exactly twenty six words before and after, "Thou art with me." This is the central message of this Psalm, the lynch pin. The Lord is with us in all seasons of our life where graciousness and abundance is promised

We need a place where we can recharge and be fed and nourished. For in that rest we put our feet firmly back on the strong foundation of God. We regain our balance, so we don't stumble and get lost or get swallowed whole by the uncaring world. The stress is removed, and we are recharged so we can make a difference in the world. We need the assurance of the Lord's presence because the world needs us to go out to carry the good news, to speak the word of truth and to bind up the brokenhearted. Our strength to do this comes from time with the Lord, when he restores our souls. Amen.



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