

Souls Restored

By
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

April 21, 2024

Psalm 23

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

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

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

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

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

⁶Surely 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.

John 10:1-18

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

My closest pastoral colleagues and I irreverently call this day “Sheep Sunday.” In the wisdom of the church, every year, three Sundays after Easter, the Common Lectionary dishes up Psalm 23 and a selection of verses from the tenth chapter of John. We at Bryn Mawr dip in and out of the Lectionary’s assigned readings for each Sunday, but this year it felt unifying to me in these days of deep divisions. Unifying to know that this Spring we are attending to the same readings as our friends in nearby Episcopal, United Methodist, Catholic congregations and more. In simply hearing these familiar texts we are united with our neighboring churches and literally with Christians around the world who are also listening to these same readings.

In this season of Eastertide, while we are still absorbing the good news of resurrection, we return to the truth of these ancient promises: God is our Shepherd – God is with us, God is beside us, God leads us and feeds us and cares for us. The Good Shepherd’s rod will poke and prod, and God’s staff will pull us back from the brink. It is amazing how powerful these ancient images of God the Shepherd and we the vulnerable sheep are for us, so far removed as we are from the rural, pastoral life of real shepherding. Even in our urban and sophisticated context I’m not sure we ever tire of hearing, *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want... I am the Good Shepherd, I know my own and my own know me.* The words themselves do what the Psalm says God does - they restore our souls.

I have recently been in a conversation by email with several high school classmates. One of our old friends died recently from pancreatic cancer at the unexpected age of 64. You know how these things go – one in the group had a bunch of our email addresses, and sent out the obituary and then folks chimed in remembering our friend Laura. People wrote lovely memories, and there was also an

aspect of the conversation that became something like a disembodied grief group, as old friends were wrapping our heads and hearts around the hard reminder that not everyone will show up at the next reunion, not everyone lives into their nineties. One of the women on this email chain expressed her grief and sadness when she got the news of Laura's death saying – *it took my breath away*.

It took my breath away. That's exactly where the Psalmist steps in and holds us close with this beautiful promise: *He restoreth my soul*. God restores our souls. The Hebrew word for soul is *nephesh*. It means “breath of life.” God restores my life, my breath. Literally, God gives me back my breath.

You remember, back in the beginning of Genesis after God did all that good work of creation – forming the world out of a deep chaotic void, separating light from darkness, putting up the sun and moon in the sky and populating outer space with stars, creating the birds of the air and fish in the seas and animals to creep upon the land and finally, making human beings and giving them a job to name the animals and to care for the creation. After all of that it says on the seventh day God rested. The Hebrew word there is *nephesh*. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says, “God *nephesh-ed*.” God rested. God stopped to catch her breath.

Likewise, when we feel as if our breath has been kicked out of us, or taken away by grief or worry or plain old exhaustion, God gives us our breath back. God the Good Shepherd restores our souls. It seems all the other promises in Psalm 23: the green pastures, the still waters, the walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the comfort, the table set, the overflowing cup, the goodness and mercy which pursue us – all of them are part of this one – God restores our souls.

Sharon Brous is Senior Rabbi for a Jewish community based in Los Angeles and a writer. She has discovered an obscure Rabbinic text that she says has become her unlikely teacher and guide over the last several months. While the war rages in Israel and Gaza, she writes that this ancient text has become her north star, “as so many of us have felt as if we’ve been drowning in an ocean of sorrow and hopelessness.” Buried deep within the Mishnah, a Jewish legal compendium from around the third century, is an ancient practice that reflects a deep understanding of the human psyche and spirit.

The text describes a pilgrimage ritual when thousands of Jews would ascend to the Temple in Jerusalem. They would climb the steps of the Temple Mount and enter its enormous plaza, turning to the right en masse, circling counter clockwise. Meanwhile, the brokenhearted and the mourners would make the same ritual walk but they would turn to the left and circle in the opposite direction. Every step the mourners took came against the current of the others. When the ones walking counter clockwise encountered someone in pain coming toward them, they would look into that person’s eyes and inquire: “What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?” “My father died,” a person might say, “there are so many things I never got to say to him.” Or perhaps, “My child is sick and we are waiting for a cure.” Those who walked from the right would offer this blessing: “May the Holy One comfort you,” they would say, “you are not alone.” Then they would continue to walk until the next person approached.

Sharon Brous reflects on the ritual, writing, “This timeless wisdom speaks to what it means to be human in a world of pain...When your heart is broken, when the specter of death visits your family, when you feel lost and alone and inclined to retreat, you show up. You entrust your pain to the community.” This ritual enables everyone to recognize: this year, you walk toward the path of the

anguished. Perhaps next year, it will be me. I hold your broken heart knowing that one day, you will hold mine. On your good days, she goes on to say, the days when you can breathe, show up for those walking against the current, show up for people barely holding on, and ask “Tell me about your sorrow,” for that may be the deepest affirmation of our humanity, even in these terribly inhumane times.” She concludes, “It is an expression of love and sacred responsibility to turn to another person in her moment of deepest anguish and say: Your sorrow may scare me, it may unsettle me. But I will not abandon you. I will meet your grief with relentless love.”¹

I think that was why Jesus reached back into the scriptures he knew by heart and pulled forth the sacred image of the Shepherd. In this chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus is preparing the disciples for his departure. He will not be present to them in the same way after his death and resurrection. He knew his suffering and death were coming; and he wanted to remind his disciples that they would always be comforted; they would never be alone. While they are doing the good work Jesus has shown them, spreading God’s mercy and goodness in a world of anguish and pain, they have a Good Shepherd who will restore their souls, who will help them breathe the breath of life, and they have each other.

It seems fitting to remember these Shepherd and sheep images today as we celebrate the ordination and installation of Elders and Deacons. I always begin church officer training by reading a passage from First Peter which describes the office of Elder saying in part: *I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge... be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.*

¹ Sharon Brous, “Train Yourself to Always Show Up,” New York Times, Jan. 19, 2024.

The chief shepherd is already here. The Risen Christ has shown up as the Good Shepherd. He restores our souls. Then we – in turn – care for and tend to the sorrows and souls of one another. How did Rabbi Sharon Brous say it? It is an expression of God's love. It is our sacred responsibility.

AMEN.