

## The Lord is My . . .

April 25, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

*Texts: Psalm 23*

A few months ago, a poet friend of mine texted me a link to a website that a colleague of hers had created. I clicked, and it brought me to a blank page with just 12 lines of text. It was a version of Psalm 23. It began:

*The Lord is my keeper, I shall not yearn for anything  
You make me lie down beside the lake  
You lead me to the Gardner museum  
You restore my capacity for kindness*

And on it went. Cool, I thought! I'm all for a rewrite of the themes of Psalm 23, though I was surprised that there was literally nothing else on the website, but for a tiny logo that said, "powered by Trinket." I wondered if I was missing something. I refreshed my browser, visiting the same site again. Again, a blank page with 12 lines but this time the words were different. This one began with "the Lord is my caregiver." Apparently, the poet/artist Christie Towers figured out a way to code the site such that it delivers a new version of Psalm 23 with every click. No two versions are alike. I read and clicking, reading and clicking, for a wondrous array would-be Psalm 23's.

They began with

*The Lord is  
my compass...  
my mother...  
my trainer...  
my mentor...  
my lighthouse...  
and even  
The Lord is my DJ...*

Kinda fun, right? They go on from there:

*You make me lie down...  
in sweet meadows...  
on warm sheets...  
in a park,  
in tide pools,  
or to float on a raft in the ocean under the bright sun*

*You lead me...  
to birdsong,  
to the Common,*

*to my community,  
to consider the moon,  
to sing,  
to find sunshine on my face.*

You restore...  
*my lifeline,  
my music,  
the God inside of me.*

Yea, though I walk...  
*through emotional poverty,  
through spiritual hopelessness,  
through the post-capitalist hellscape of abandoned Main Street and factories and homes*

I will fear *no chaos...*  
I will fear *no solitude...*  
I will fear no clowns...

For you are with me...  
*Your word embraces me.  
Your thoughts and prayers cozy me...  
Your love and truth sanctuaries me...*

You prepare...  
*a buffet...  
a block party...  
[even] a disco...*

before me in the presence of...  
*my naysayers...  
of roadblocks...  
of those who mock, ignore or hate me...  
of those who diminish my light...*

I'm going to save the last lines for the end, but you get the idea. It's a whimsical and fun little exercise Who knew that refreshing one's browser could so readily bring an ever-gurgling stream of spiritual imagery, all with the original Psalm 23 at the source. I'll post the link it in the chat during our zoom coffee hour or you can go ahead and google "Christie Towers Psalm 23", later!<sup>1</sup>

Psalm 23 was in the lectionary for this fourth Sunday of Easter. I chose it in part because I knew we'd be honoring Earth Day today. I was drawn to the images of God's creation - the still waters, the green pastures, and the sense of not wanting for anything, of being satisfied at a banquet of God's abundant beauty, presence and love. I also chose this before the Derek Chauvin verdict came down, thinking we might need some of Psalm 23's solace and the assurance of God's love, in the shadows and valley of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://christie-towers-9331.trinket.io/sites/psalm-23-final>

ongoing racial violence and police brutality. And I chose it before I knew I'd spend Wednesday evening at Cynthia Shoemaker's bedside. Cynthia loved Psalm 23. We let Bobby McFerrin sing a favorite version to her - "She makes me lie down in green meadows, beside still waters, she will lead. We also sang her the Bay Psalm version from our hymnbook that we will soon sing. Her professional jazz musician son Will accompanied us on his accordion. It was an exquisite privilege to be there.

Today, I'm, grateful for the ways that Psalm 23 offers to hold it all - the peace and the sadness at a beloved one's death, the relief and the ongoing pain of this past's week headlines, and yes even an Earth Sunday celebration of Creation's splendor and with it the cautious hope of a renewed commitment to climate accords. Alleluia!

What is it about Psalm 23, with words so fitting for so many occasions? We may associate them most with memorial and graveside services, yet I've seen them chosen for weddings and evoked at joyful celebrations. No wonder so many of us were taught to memorize them! Especially on this Earth Sunday, with the rain falling gently outside our windows, and regardless of what version we prefer, Psalm 23 hold some special invitations for us today.

First, an invitation to be led. There is literally, as invitation, to be led by still waters, to rest in a pleasant field! We can stop right there. We should take every chance to imbibe a refreshment of our lives from the beauty and life that surround us on this little blue dot we call home. And how much more can we do so when we can learn to surrender our agendas, our to do list, our step-counting ways, and let ourselves pause long enough to hear the myriad ways God and nature is leading us, coaxing us, pulling us out of ourselves to receive the astounding gifts each day brings? I know many of you have more than practice at this than me so I'm preaching to myself here! We joke about 'nature's call' when we are being disrupted from our busyness, but consider the range of creation's reverie - a bird song, the cold nose of a pet on our cheek, the blossoming of magnolias, forsythia, lilacs, tulips - all meant to awaken and lead and call us to attention, to go find some still waters, and to go a pleasant fields, to rest and receive God's gracious gifts! Psalm 23's invitation is simple...listen and be led.

And not only by still waters, but in paths of righteousness, in right paths, too. Pentecostal Tabernacle Church's Bishop Green and Carlyle and I had a fascinating conversation earlier this week wondering about next steps for our churches. Bishop shared how some evangelical and Pentecostals he knows are hearing calls for justice anew because they are starting to read different biblical translations than their forebears. For years they read in the prophets and elsewhere, that word righteousness, and so came to care a great deal about individual righteousness and moral piety, as the primary aim of the spiritual! He said he and his colleagues are now hearing new translations, they are hearing the word and call not merely to embody individual righteousness but to collective justice! Even in Psalm 23, it changes the meaning: You lead me in "pathways of justice" for your name's sake! In fact, justice is a more accurate translation from the Hebrew. And here again, even in our work economic justice, racial justice and climate justice, we find an invitation to be led, to recall we are not alone in that walk or work, that we are following a good shepherd, a reliable compass, a fierce trainer who will lead and guide us as we follow the ways of justice, even when we are in those spaces of lament, even when we are languishing or despairing about the enormity of the challenges we face.

Second, Psalm 23 offers a profound invitation to recognize that "we shall not yearn for anything!" We shall not want. It's an invitation to be satisfied. Just imagine the threat of this line to Apple and Amazon, to our consumerist ways and capitalist culture! The point here is not that God will give us everything

we ask for or desire, but rather God will provide what is needed for us to live securely. As we are led by still waters, as we are led to live in justice, consider doing so and already feeling fully satisfied, already feeling joy and love because we are trusting that we are on the path, trusting enough in God's so as to stave off our cynicism, or that sense that something is off or missing. For most of us, myself included, this involves a profound reorientation of our hearts, minds and bodies, and our actions too. To be so led, and to live with such a deep satisfaction, is not merely a passive exercise of receiving the abundance of creation's beauty, of taking what is given and saying I'm satisfied, thank you I have enough, thank you. It also involves our sharing it, our honoring it by participating.

In terms of ecological sustainability and climate justice, Robin Wall Kimmerer called *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, puts the question this way: "Whether we are digging wild leeks or going to the mall, how we consume in a way that does justice to the lives we take?"<sup>2</sup> And here she introduces the Indigenous wisdom of "The Honorable Harvest," guidelines for holding ourselves in mutual and accountable relationship with living things. It acknowledges that we do have needs - we need the earth, plants for example, to survive. Even the most anti-consumerist, anti-capitalist needs to consume certain things. Though the Honorable Harvest isn't written down or even spoken consistently as a whole, she says it might look something like this:

*Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.*  
*Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.*  
*Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.*  
*Never take the first. Never take the last.*  
*Take only what you need. Take only that which is given.*  
*Never take more than half.*  
*Leave some for others.*  
*Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.*  
*Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.*  
*Share.*  
*Give thanks for what you have been given.*  
*Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.*  
*Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.*<sup>3</sup>

Talk about a right path! Talk about a pathway of justice, a spiritual guide to sustainability that can restore our souls and perhaps restore our planet. She also writes:

*Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.*<sup>4</sup>

Back to Psalm 23. I have yet one more version, a Japanese translation by Toki Miyashina, Psalm 23 for Busy People, and I share this one especially for those parent and kids who were on vacation this past week. I pray you were led somewhere far away, at least from your zoom screens. And I wondered if you are feeling worried about the jumping back into the business of the coming week. For that matter, I

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<sup>2</sup> Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (p. 177). Milkweed Editions. 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 183.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p 327.

wonder if we are all feeling a bit anxious about a return to the bustle of life as things open up. Hear Psalm 23 anew once more:

*The Lord is my Pace-setter, I shall not rush;  
He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals.  
He provides me with images of stillness,  
which restore my serenity.  
He leads me in ways of efficiency  
through calmness of mind,  
and His guidance is peace.  
Even though I have a great many things  
to accomplish each day,  
I will not fret, for His presence is here;  
His timelessness, His all importance,  
will keep me in balance.  
He prepares refreshment and renewal  
in midst of my activity,  
By anointing my mind with His oils of tranquility.  
My cup of joyous energy overflows,  
surely harmony and effectiveness  
shall be the fruits of my hours,  
for I shall walk, in the pace of my Lord  
and dwell in His house forever.*

Do yourselves a favor if you haven't already and memorize a favorite version of Psalm 23 or find a new one that allows you to hear its constantly refreshing invitation! Sit with it this week, as you look out a window before another Zoom meeting or recite it to yourself on a morning walk in the woods or stroll by a stream. Sing the psalm we are about to sing in tomorrow's shower! Share your practice with us next week when we take our earth day walk to the Charles. Every day is Earth Day, right? Do this and see what happens. Try trusting the great wisdom of Psalm 23 and surely, goodness and mercy, wholeness and connection, love and humility, sweetness and reprieve, will follow you, will pursue you even, and you too will dwell in the harbor, the home, the sanctuary, the acceptance, the love of God, for all your days. Amen!