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Rest in God
Psalm 23

Pr. Jim's Sermon
May 3, 2020
4th Sunday in Lent
Psalm 23

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I do not lack;
² he provides rest for me in green pastures.
He leads me to peaceful waters.
³ He restores my life.
He leads me along the paths of righteousness
for the sake of his name.
⁴ Even if I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil.
For you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they give me courage.

⁵ You set a table for me,
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil,
my cup is abundant.
⁶ Indeed, goodness and *hesed* [steadfast love]
pursue me all the days of my life.
And I will return to the house of the LORD,
for the length of my days.

Apart from John 3:16, Psalm 23 is probably the most well-known passage in all of scripture. It is often read at funerals and in times of trouble. We know it so well that our familiarity often keeps us from really understanding it. I have provided this translation from Rolf Jacobson so that we could attempt to see it with fresh eyes.

Psalm 23 begins with the bold claim: "The Lord is my shepherd, I do not lack." With God as our shepherd and we as God's sheep, we want for nothing because our God provides for us everything we truly need. Like any good shepherd, the psalmist declares, our God leads us to good pasture and cool water.

We are used to hearing the King James Version which says, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." This translation makes it sound like a command, as if God has plopped us in a fine field and said, "Sit! Stay! *Staaaaay*. Good boy!" But the original Hebrew sounds more like this: "he *provides rest* for me in green pastures." There is no coercion here. God, like a good shepherd, simply provides the sheep a safe place to obtain nourishment and rest.

The metaphors of pasture and water, the psalmist explains, simply mean that God, as shepherd, "restores our life" or "gives us life." This psalm shows us that our God is a God of the pasture,

which is to say that our God shepherds us toward peaceful places where we can stop, rest, and revitalize.

The idea of rest is central to understanding Psalm 23. Ancient Israelites believed, and modern-day Jews still believe, that rest is central to God's identity. The creation story in Genesis 1 states that God rested on the seventh day of creation. The ancient Rabbis went so far as to claim that God did not just rest on the seventh day; God actually *created* the act of resting on the seventh day.

Sabbath, which is a Hebrew word meaning "stop" or "rest," becomes *the* central practice in following God. When God rescues Israel from slavery in Egypt, God commands Israel to observe the Sabbath. God chooses Israel as God's own, and the Sabbath day becomes the way the Israelites remind themselves that they no longer belong to slave labor in Egypt; rather they belong completely to God.

We modern Christians have little understanding of Sabbath. Over time, the Christian Sabbath became less about rest and more about going to church. When you read Martin Luther's thoughts on the Sabbath, he says absolutely nothing about rest, but rather just that the Sabbath is the day to hear good preaching. We make a serious mistake when we forget the original purpose of the Sabbath because we forget that rest is central to our relationship with God.

We are obsessed with work. When we meet a new person, what's the first question we ask? "What do you do?" This question assumes that there is little more to us than the work we do. In some ways, we, like ancient Israel, have become enslaved to our work. The Israelites were slaves for so long that they couldn't fathom any way of life but intense work. God instituted the Sabbath in order to free their minds from that obsession. The Sabbath reminded Israel, and it can remind us today, that we are not slaves to work; we are not defined by our productivity; we are not bound by our success. Our identity lies not in our work but completely in God. The only way to remind ourselves of this profound truth is to rest.

Isabel, Ezra, and I have been keeping a weekly Sabbath for a couple years now. One day a week, typically a Monday since that's my day off, we abstain from work entirely. I don't check email, or make phone calls, or work on a sermon; we don't vacuum or sweep or clean the toilets. We abstain from our work and instead we rest.

But keeping Sabbath is not just about what you *can't* do, it's also about what you *can* do. Psalm 23 tells us that the Lord restores our life. On Sabbath we strive to do things that restore life. On Sabbath you are free from expectation. Do what will bring you life: maybe it's knitting or hiking or reading or gardening or woodworking or sitting on your back porch with a cup of coffee and watching the sunrise. On Sabbath, Isabel, Ezra, and I like to cook a nice big breakfast together as a family, take long walks to the park, and read *a lot*. As the weather gets nicer, I'll go fishing, Isabel will go walking, and Ezra will play outside with the hose. Whatever will give you rest,

whatever will remind you that you belong to the God who restores your life—that's what you do on Sabbath.

It sounds counterintuitive, but resting well *can* be hard work. My family and I found out early that taking a whole Sabbath day to binge-watch Netflix is not actually restful or lifegiving—instead it just made us depressed. It takes some creativity to free yourself of expectations and do what heals you. I find it difficult to take my mind off of my work, even on Sabbath day. I am constantly working to rewire my brain, to pull my thoughts away from my work and place them back on my God and my family. I am constantly battling the temptation to put Sabbath aside and take up work again. Resting well takes discipline.

The world is full of whispered lies that try to convince us we belong to things other than God. Work, like many things, is good when it is in its place; but work can very quickly try to take the place of God. Fear is the same way; it can keep you alive in dire situations, but it can also become the master of your life.

Psalm 23 says, “even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil. For you are with me. Your rod and your staff—they give me courage.” Part of a shepherd's job is defending the flock. The shepherd's staff was largely a means of defense, used to whack any wolves that might try to make off with a sheep. God does not just lead us to places of rest; God actively protects us and provides for us while we rest. God's rod and staff give us the courage to rest and the faith to trust that our lives will not fall apart around us if we take the time to rest.

You see, the rest that we find in God doesn't just come in times of peace; it exists at all times, especially in the midst of danger. It is tempting to only practice Sabbath when life is calm and Sabbath is convenient. But I have found that the busy, chaotic, and challenging times are when I need Sabbath the most. Indeed, the moment I feel I have no time for Sabbath is precisely the moment when I need to take it. In the midst of the dark valleys, I need my life and my courage restored. When I am lost, I need to let my shepherd find me. When I am overwhelmed, I need God to remind me that I belong not to my work or my fear or my anxiety, but to God alone.

You will walk through darkness, and it will try to convince you that you belong to it. Don't listen. You belong to God. I invite you this week to remind yourself of this truth by taking a Sabbath; a *real* Sabbath. It doesn't have to be a Saturday or Sunday. It can be whatever day works best for you. But take a day—a whole day—to abstain from work. Psalm 23 tells us that God leads us to rest and restores our life. So take a Sabbath day, and do what restores your life.

Amen.