

Walking through the valley of death and other happy thoughts

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

Will Fitzgerald

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Psalm 23

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
- 3 he restores my soul
He leads me in right paths
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.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

The Context

On February 3, my friend Janelle, who is not very old, wrote:

So, what do you do when you see the ENT for a sinus and ear infection and learn that you have neither – “just” a mass in your sinus that is growing rapidly and has caused significant bone loss and some hearing loss? (And one heck of a lot of ear, neck, jaw and skull pain on your right side.)

Her response was to pop in a Sacred Harp CD to listen to “Peace and Joy” on repeat, get some blood work done, call her family, and then name that mass, as

she had previously done with cancer masses in her breasts previously, which she'd named Screwtape and Wormwood:

I have christened this sinus mass as Jadis (C.S. Lewis Chronicles of Narnia – The White Witch). A cold an unfeeling witch with a capital B.

To Jadis I say, "Screw you." You don't win no matter what happens. And you're not going to bring me down because Aslan is my friend and Protector and He wins in the end regardless of my personal outcome.

Janelle is as funny and brave and faithful a person I know. Things have not gone well for her health. In late February, her doctor said that there are too many lesions to count, spread throughout her body. Since then, she has undergone chemotherapy to check growth in her liver, but it was clear then to her that this was a temporary measure. Yesterday she wrote to say she had completed the chemotherapy for the liver, but has decided not to do any further treatments. She is investigating hospice options now. She writes:

While I know that God can work a miracle if he chooses, I am not looking for a miracle. As I've said, albeit shorter than I would have liked, I have had a good life. My obligations to my family are met and I have no children to prompt me to extend my life (quality or not) to see to their care or experience special milestones. So my prayers are that I have an easy death and that beyond that, God's will be done and God be glorified in this process. Please make these your prayers for me as well.

I have had Janelle in mind as I have prepared this morning's teaching on Psalm 23.

Kenneth Bailey writes wisely on Psalm 23 and other scriptures that use the image the shepherd. He notes that, among the earliest Christians of which we have archeological evidence, the most characteristic symbol was not the cross, perhaps surprisingly, but the fish, the vine, and the shepherd.

This psalm is well loved, and has been well loved for centuries.

One of Bailey's strengths is to pay attention to the structure of Bible passages. He notes that Psalm 23 has a very clear structure, something which is often called *inverted parallelism*. Our house has two sets of steps facing each other, each meeting in the middle, and then to up to the second floor. You can walk up one set of steps, reach the landing, and then walk down the other set of steps. Kids and dogs love it. Every step on one side has a companion step on the other side, and they do the same thing, the same work: getting you up to or down from the landing.

Similarly, Psalm 23 has steps which walk up to a landing, and down again, with the steps doing similar work. There seem to be three steps up, a “landing,” and three steps down.

Step 1 up: *The Lord provides* (v 1): I shall not want.

Step 2 up: *Food and drink* are provided (v 2): Green pastures and still waters.

Step 3 up: The Lord provides *safety and rescue* (v 3): God restores my soul

Landing: The valley of the shadow of death (v 4)

Step 3 down: The Lord provides *safety and rescue* (v 5): The rod and staff comfort me.

Step 2 down: *Food and drink* are provided (v 6): You prepare a table ... my cup overflows.

Step 1 down: *The Lord provides* (v 7): Goodness and mercy shall follow, and I will dwell in the Lord’s house.

I think what I want to get across today is how that “landing” is wrapped in this psalm. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,” says the psalmist. And we wonder, how can the psalmist, how can we, how can someone like Janelle walk in the shadow of death – which is evil, and not fear?

Let me try to leave you with two images: the divine shepherd and the divine hostess.

For the psalmist, this image of the providing shepherd is key. The shepherd goes after the sheep, God “brings my wandering spirit back when I forsake his ways” as one of our hymns go. The guiding staff of God and the defensive rod of God protect us from ourselves, and from others.

But also, there is this image of the prepared table, the feast, with more than enough food and more than enough drink for us to enjoy, even in the midst of the enemy. Bailey points out that God is acting as the divine hostess, as in Proverbs 9:1-5:

- 1 Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
- 2 She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.
- 3 She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls
from the highest places in the town,

4 “You that are simple, turn in here!”
To those without sense she says,
5 “Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.

God walks alongside us, God provides a feast for us, even in the face of death. It's not always easy to see (though I pray that God will always bring us back from our wanderings). There is often a banquet even in the midst of sorrow, if we will look for it and claim it.

I suspect Janelle doesn't want to be a poster child, and mostly my prayers for her are her prayers for her. But I appreciate that she is on the landing, and in that shadow, she can recall an abundantly providing God as she stands there.