

St. Matthew's Women's Retreat

Lake Arrowhead, California

August 27-29, 2010

Guide to Meditations on Psalm 23

Scripture is like a meal, best savored in small bites, and slowly chewed and consumed in order to fully savor its nuances of flavor. This guide has been developed to help you stretch your thinking and expand your spirit as you spend time alone and are able to share with others. We've taken the Psalm phrase by phrase, and provided several translations and interpretations, both from Jewish as well as Christian sources. This series can be used as a resource over the weekend, or later on, stretched out over 15 days (covering just one phrase per day) – try it at whatever pace or intensity you think is good. It is unnecessary that you push yourself to “complete” it. It can be used alone or with a prayer partner or in a group setting.

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***If you choose to use this guide at our retreat and it helps you, use it;
but if it is a distraction, ignore it!***

We hope your meditation and prayer on the 23rd Psalm will go beyond your childhood experience and understanding, that its meaning will be enhanced. We pray that your learning will not end here, but that you'll carry this guide home, along with the notes you will have made for yourself. After each of fifteen segments in the Psalm, there is opportunity for you to write down your thoughts and experiences. Do not think that you must write everything! It doesn't have to make sense to anyone but you! Choose key words that will remind you of the insights you received from the Holy Spirit – what you write down does not have to be meaningful to anyone else but you! This *is not* “homework,” or any kind of academic exercise! Write down what is important *to you*. There are *no* “right answers”! No one is going to check up on you or review what you wrote!

Then, respecting your own experience and boundaries of privacy or safety -- only as you are comfortable -- you may choose to share your experiences and insights with some of your sisters during the retreat and with others afterward. In this process, we shepherd one another, nurturing, feeding, loving, guiding, sharing and protecting, and building up the People of God. This is your time! This is our time to build faith, build up the Body of Christ, to strengthen our community, and to prepare us for being Christ to others.

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The Lord is my shepherd [feeds, guides, and shields me].¹

The Lord [Sustainer] shepherds me continually.²

The Lord is my shepherd³

The Lord is my shepherd;⁴

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This phrase gives us a window into a deep and yet a very practical working relationship between a person and his or her Creator. He brought all that exists into being. And from the most microscopic organisms here on earth to gigantic galaxies millions of light-years away, the universe functions in accord with laws of order beyond our grasp. Yet, God also chose to create each of us and to be in personal relationship with us. I belong to Him, just because he chose to create me and to shepherd me through this life.

The image of 'shepherd' is often seen in the Old Testament and again in the New Testament. Jesus said **"I am the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. (John 10:11)"** In the Aramaic, the word "good" means "skilled." We have a Shepherd who is skilled, who knows us, oversees our needs, and will give himself for us. A shepherd over a flock has strong investment in his sheep. He bought them for a good price, and for them to flourish, he must constantly attend to their endless needs – just as God constantly intercedes on our behalf. Sheep don't just survive on their own out on the hillside. You don't just put them on a hillside and leave them!

In the Aramaic language, which is closely related to the Hebrew, notice that the word "shepherd," is not a noun, but a verb, and it implies that the Lord is in the act of shepherding us; it is not a completed action but it continues to take place! The word, "Lord," means our sustainer!

The analogy between sheep and people is a good one. Alas, sheep and people are more similar than we might like to admit to ourselves and we share a common biology. A flock that is restless, agitated, and disturbed does not grow and mature properly. This is also true of people. Sheep are said to be timid and easily panicked even when a stray rabbit bounds out from behind a bush. This can result in the entire flock rushing headlong in a stampede in blind fear, even though they do not know what set off their panic. They act on their herd instinct for

¹ The **words in black** are rendered from the *Amplified Bible* (1987). Brackets [] contain justified clarifying words or comments not actually expressed in the immediate original text, as well as definitions of Hebrew names.

² The **words in green** are rendered by Rocco A. Errico from an expanded translation from Aramaic. *The Great Shepherd: The 23rd Psalm from Aramaic*. Noohra Foundation: www.noohra.com

³ The words **in red** are rendered in *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* by Robert Alter (2007) who is a Hebrew literary scholar.

⁴ The words **in blue** come from the *Tanakh, the Jewish Study Bible* (2004).

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survival. This is in their nature because in the wild, they must be prepared to flee for their lives. In actuality, they can't defend themselves except by running. Some of us are not very different from them at times. Nothing quiets them more rapidly than for the Shepherd to be present to them, something he must do night and day.

Ah, yes, join with me on this journey with the Good Shepherd, my dear fellow cowards! Yes, we're more like sheep than we want to admit! How often I have overreacted and magnified some anticipated problem instead of trusting God! I need to remember to whom do I belong. With whom do I identify most closely in my life? Who can I count on? To whom can I go when life seems like "it's all beyond me"?

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- Recall a time when you were a small child, when you didn't understand what was going on where an adult was in charge and took care of the situation. How did you feel?
- Recall a time when your own child was small and did not understand something that was happening that was hurtful or painful, and you tried very hard to make it better. Yet, you may not have been able to prevent the pain. If we who are human give good things to our children, how much more so does God try to shepherd us!
- We are truly as dependent as the sheep, something we are often reluctant to recognize. Think about adult relationships, both past and present, when you became aware of your need, or that you became aware of the need of someone else on you.
- What needs do you most frequently worry about getting met? What needs are you most reluctant to admit to anyone?
- In the past, what were some of the miracles – big or little - in your life, where you were fed (physically, emotionally, spiritually), where you received needed nurturance, guidance, or where you were shielded from harm?
- We tend to think of God as a last resort, someone we ask for help when we think we have run out of options. But as you think about the Lord, our Sustainer who continually shepherds us, ask God to feed you and nourish you today, to lead you into green pastures, and become aware of how you are being sustained right now, today.
- Choose one version of the first phrase from the 23rd Psalm and repeat it several times, slowly, prayerfully. Or create one of your own, using words from the translations we have provided such as "You are my sustainer," "You are my guide," "You are my protector." "The Lord sustains me continually." Let the words ebb and flow with your breathing.

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I shall not lack.
I lack nothing at all.
I shall not want.
I lack nothing.

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A hungry or poorly nourished sheep is constantly on her feet, searching everywhere for another mouthful to end her hunger. She is so restless that she cannot thrive, and she lacks vigor, vitality, and will not produce healthy offspring. With good management and building of a flourishing pasture, the sheep will be knee-deep in rich legumes and green grass. A lamb in such favorable circumstances can reach 100 pounds in weight within 100 days of her birth! The picture we have portrayed in scripture is the Promised Land, a land to which the Israelites would be led to out of Egypt. It was a land "flowing with milk and honey." While this rich image seems a little strange to us today, it actually depicts the situation of well-being in an ancient agricultural land. The peak season is the springtime when the livestock are reproducing and producing milk, and the bees are actively pollinating and producing honey, and this is the image of the Promised Land.

In the Hebrew or Aramaic, the phrase is in the present tense, not future. In English, the use of "shall not" seems to suggest more of an anticipation rather than nourishment actually occurring now. But we need not anticipate lack, or think about the future as our only certain reward, because *right now* we lack nothing! Because our Sustainer is presently shepherding us, we lack nothing at all! We lack nothing because of his leadership, his guidance! And lack is not a material thing; it is a state of mind and spirit. That is why this Psalm is so rich for us because it addresses where the real lack is, in the mind, in the heart, and in the soul. When we anticipate and fear for lacking something, many of our jealous, competitive, sinful interactions with others will emerge. We all know the New Testament parables of the rich men for whom their material possessions were *never enough* and so we must go to the core behind our discontent.

The KJB version of "I shall not want" can seem to imply that it is what we "want" that we will not lack, e.g. a *desire* for something that is not essential vs. a *deficit* of something that is needed. We all have been taught as children that we must learn to differentiate between "want" and "need." In this verse, the use of the term, "want" refers to the older English of "not wanting" meaning not lacking. God does not promise us everything we want, but living in his presence we will lack nothing essential to our spiritual well-being. Sometimes what we want is not what we need, and we may not make this discrimination.

- What are our sources of nurturance that are really satisfying? Think about your life, and what are the true, the deep sources of nurturance and fulfillment that you have experienced.

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- How do you experience the difference between thinking of "I *shall not* lack" vs. "I lack nothing"?
- How is our anxiety, dissatisfaction, and frustration fueled by anticipating or fantasizing, about the future? How are we like the sheep who can't grow and flourish?
- What happens if we focus instead on here and now?
- Out in the woods nearby, find a spot and sit quietly, becoming as fully aware as you can of what is going on around you – savoring the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations. Meditate on the adequacy and completeness of this moment.
- In the present tense, the Sustainer is presently shepherding us, and we lack nothing. Without acknowledging the Source, the phrase is empty! Each phrase of this Psalm builds on the previous one!
- Take a moment to thank the Creator, the Sustainer of your life for shepherding and guiding you in this moment. Allow yourself to experience the fullness and richness of here and now.

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He makes me lie down in [fresh, tender] green pastures;

***In pastures of strength [richness] He makes me dwell
because of your name.***

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***In grass meadows He makes me⁵ lie down,
He makes me lie down in green pastures;***

Phillip Keller, who wrote a little book called *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (last printed in 1996, but still available used through Amazon.com) told the story of a sheep owner next door to him who took very poor care of his animals. They were thin, weak, riddled with parasites, and often would come over to the fence that divided them from Phillip's well-cared-for flock. "...they would come and stand at the fence staring blankly through the woven wire at the green lush pastures which my flock enjoyed (Page 8)." They had only muddy water to drink, a lack of salt and other minerals. "In my mind's eye I can see them standing at the fence, huddled sadly in little knots, staring wistfully through the wires at the rich pastures on the other side (Page 16)."

Green pastures, especially in Palestine where David wrote his Psalms and tended to his father's sheep, didn't just happen because the land is typically dry, parched, brown, and sun-burned. Such green pastures are planned for, plowed, tilled, seeded, watered, and developed with care for the sheep. In the Aramaic language, the pastures are not merely "green," but the word implies the tender, nutritious, new growth part of the plant -- not the tough, dried out, half-dead growth which has no nutrients left in it. Also, the Aramaic and Hebrew phrase of making me lie down says to be at ease, not to fear -- we can relax our guard because we are being tended to. The sheep can lie down and chew their cud, and not anxiously search for food. Sheep don't consume their food standing up, and if they search constantly, they lose weight.

We, in distress over our own inadequacies, only have to ask the Good Shepherd to take us in to his pasture. Because we belong to Christ and we recognize him as our Shepherd, we can know that our needs will be attended to. As we entrust ourselves to Him, we will be fed. We don't have to compete or jockey for position. And we are contained in his pasture together.

Life is as uncertain for us as it is for the sheep. It is the unknown, the unexpected that evokes our panic, paralyzing us in fear. Sheep will not lie down until they are *absolutely sure* that they are safe. Because of rivalry among sheep, they often compete for status and self-assertion -- does that sound familiar? Jealousy and competition have biological roots which we share with the sheep. You can see the same dynamics operating between two pets in the same household or two or more children, especially if they are close in age. But when the Shepherd comes into sight, sheep forget their rivalries and stop fighting. Oh, how we wish it was as simple at that

⁵ Alter says that the Hebrew verb used here, *hirbits*, is a specialized one for making animals lie down; hence, the sheep-shepherd metaphor is carefully maintained.

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with our children! But when they are all truly assured of the parents' love and their special and unique relationship with the parent, there's a greater chance that they will play harmoniously. And Christ told his disciples over and over, to give up their competition for position and status in His Kingdom. In the end, if our eyes are on Him, we can be at rest in the pasture. We can be set free of fears of not getting enough nurturance and love, and then we are free to be merciful with our fellow sheep. Blessed [happy, to be envied] are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy [Matthew 5:7]

But, the analogy of sheep only goes so far. We are all aware of the mistreatment and helplessness of animals or humans in this world. It is at this point that we must step in to be Christ in the world, and to shepherd those in need, be they two-legged or four-legged.

- Visualize the lushness of tender nutritious grass of the Good Shepherd's flock. In your own life, what experiences of "lushness" can you call to mind? Take a moment to thank God for those moments of complete nurturance.
- In God's lushness, available to us each moment, we need not hoard, become greedy, or jealous of what others have. In the pasture of the Lord, we belong to him and we belong to the flock. How does the feeling of belonging help free us from fears of there not being "enough" to go around?

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He leads me beside the still and restful waters.

He guides me by restful [sweet] waters.

By quiet waters guides me.

He leads me to water in places of repose.

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He leads me – he does not force me, he does not demand, he does not insist. The Lord is shepherding us, guiding, leading, but never driving or riding us. Rocco Errico relates his experiences of watching shepherds and flocks in Beirut. The shepherd is in front of the flock, not behind them or driving them. In the early morning, the shepherd calls his favorite ewe by name and she comes, and he gives her salt. And as she is aroused to wakefulness the other sheep then follow. Jesus said he is the skilled shepherd and the sheep know his voice and follow him. He calls them by name. The sheep cannot drink rapidly running water, nor do they like or benefit from stagnant or muddy water. The best water is a deep but slowly moving clean water. In the Aramaic word, the sense of water which tastes sweet is implied, refreshing like an waking up from a good sleep where one is deeply rested and revitalized. Water is very important symbolically in the middle east, because it is scarce resource and essential for survival. Symbolically, water is truth. It symbolizes truth in scripture.

- As a parent or as a teacher or leader of young people, what is your experience in the differences in a child's reaction between "Do it because I said so" (for which there will be appropriate times to use) and guiding him or her toward understanding his options?
- God is leading us to truth, but not forcing truth down our throats. What is the difference you've experienced in your life between demands and guidance?
- Can we find the water of truth by ourselves?

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He refreshes and restores my life [my self];

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He restored my soul.
My life He brings back.⁶
He renews my life;

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Notice that in the Aramaic, the verb is in the past tense: It has already happened. Yet in the Hebrew it is a continual, ongoing restoration. The sense is that one was almost dead, to the point of requiring resuscitation and being brought back to life. In other words, we are brought back from the brink! How many times have we been there? I think that it is simultaneously an action that is complete, yet we will also realize it in the present tense. We can be confident that it is a done deal, and it is still going on!

Another element to the sheep metaphor here is that the restoration from near death is something that commonly occurs. It might be thought that if one is being tended by the Good Shepherd, no such mishaps would occur, but this would be wrong. The sheep experience being physically upturned, where they have fallen and are on their backs and unable to right themselves. The term, "cast down" is an old Shepherd's term for a sheep on her back who is unable to get up without help. If they are not rescued quickly, they will die in their helplessness, including quickly becoming prey to predators, or because of their immobilization, developing gas pressure due to their rumen (cud) not being processed. As the gas builds up and expands, blood circulation is cut off to the limbs. If it is in the heat of the day, the sheep can die in just a short few hours. This is the reality of sheep-herding that underpins the story of the Shepherd going out and looking for one sheep which is astray while ninety-nine of them are safe.

David, the Psalmist, also knew what it meant to be fallen, dejected and cast down in defeat. In Psalm 42:11, he cries out, 'Why are you cast down, O my soul! And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God....' For us as human sheep, being cast down is an image of utter helplessness. The Shepherd must go search for his sheep if one turns up missing, because she is likely cast down somewhere along the way.

- How has God already restored your life? Does this mean it is as good as done even though at the moment you may not be able to see resolution?
- Was there a time that you felt almost dead (physically, emotionally, spiritually) and that you were brought back (restored)?
- What are your own stories of being cast down and being rescued?
- How in this moment is God refreshing, restoring, bringing back, and renewing your life?

⁶ Alter says that "'He restores my soul' is time-honored" (Page 78) but the Hebrew word, *nefesh*, means 'life,' or 'life breath,' not 'soul.' The image is that of reviving someone who almost stopped breathing and bringing them to back to life.

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- Take a moment to thank Him for your awareness of his past and present restoration.

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He leads me in his paths of righteousness [uprightness and right standing with Him – not for my earning it, but] for His name's sake.

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And upon pathways of justice he leads me – because of Your name.

***He leads me on pathways of justice⁷ for His name's sake.
He guides me in right paths as befits His name.***

In the first four verses, God, who is our divine Shepherd, leads us to nourishment and safety. Now we are ready for finding a path in which we will walk with God. The Psalm shifts from having talked *about* God to talking *with* him. We lack nothing at all because of your name. For your name's sake, because of your reputation, we are led into right paths. The word translated as "righteousness" can also be translated as "justice." We do not earn right standing with God, but for his name's sake, we are led in to paths of justice. God gives us mercy and justice.

- What is the relationship between righteousness and justice? As we come into awareness of the gift of right standing with God, having been made whole without having to earn it, how will we live out God's justice for others in the world?
- What are "right paths as befits His name" and "pathways of justice for His name's sake" for us today?
- In the woods where we are on retreat, take a walk. Are you with others or alone? Are you on a well-marked path or is there no path at all? Pray with others that together you will find "right paths" in your lives and justice for those you encounter.

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⁷ Alter says that the use of this phrase moves the speaker from speaking of himself as a sheep, metaphorically, to speaking of himself as a human being.

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***Yes, though I walk through the [deep, sunless] valley
of the shadow of death,***

***Even if I walk through the valleys of the shadows of evil [death]
Though I walk in the valley of death's shadow⁸
Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness***

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Some remarkable saints have gone before us who have walked a deep spiritual path tell us that for everyone, there are times of the "dark night," the times when we cannot see what is ahead, the times where we are clueless and we feel abandoned. Where is God at those times? The piece of artwork you have been provided depicts that deep darkness of aloneness as a seeming abandonment. The poor sheep is stuck out there somewhere without a clue, and is hopelessly lost. The Shepherd must find her. In the artwork, there's just a bare glimmer of light, light brought by the Shepherd.

In the Aramaic, "valley" and "shadow" are plural, shadows, which means some kind of constant danger, living under a shadow, living in fear, something about to happen that is not good – an impending disaster. The Shepherd takes the sheep through a valley, during which time they huddle together, and stay close to the shepherd because the shadows hide the dangers, especially because thieves and bandits make their dens in the shadows. In the ancient mid-east, travel always entailed such risk; hence we have the story of the Good Samaritan who rescued a man who was robbed and left for dead. In our language, the rustlers were on the prowl, ready to steal, plus there is ongoing danger from wild animals springing out. So we see in our artwork that the lone sheep is surrounded by shadows, and the Shepherd actively searches until he finds her and brings her home.

- Have you known a "dark night," when you could not see or find the mercy of God, where what was happening to you felt meaningless? Did you have a different perspective later on?
- Is this the same as so-called "clinical depression"? What do you think the difference might be? Have you known someone who suffered depression? How were they impacted spiritually? In your own experiences, what do you think the difference might be? Can there be overlap? In other words, can there be a spiritual contribution to depression? And a depressive component to spiritual "dark night"?

⁸ Alter says that the Hebrew phrase, *begey tsalmawet*, is very compact and not as "wordy" as the English. There are a couple of possibilities for translation of *tsalmawet* – could be a poetic word meaning 'darkness,' or 'shadow,' while *mawet* does refer to death.

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I will fear or dread no evil, for You are with me.
I fear no calamity [evil doer] because You are with me.
I fear no harm for You are with me.⁹
I fear no harm, for You are with me;

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Notice that there is a shift with this line in the Psalm, that instead of *talking about* God, the Psalmist is *speaking directly to* God. In Aramaic, the sense is that because of God's name, in personally addressing him, fear, dread, harm are dissipated.

Psychologists often work with people who are anxious by use of a method termed "cognitive restructuring," teaching them to realize that their fantasies of unknown catastrophies typically do not actually materialize, and to not get ahead of themselves. One is taught "mindfulness," and being appreciative of the present. Thousands of years before there was a clinical science of psychology or psychiatry, the Psalmist understood our propensities to become paralyzed by fear and dread, where we might become frozen in terror, unable to make decisions or to act. So how are we spared from being overtaken by our fears? If we practice being in God's presence, we will find that our fears will dissipate and be better managed.

- How shall we know God's presence here and now, today, in this moment?
- Look around you for evidence of safety while being contained by God on your journey today.
- At a certain developmental stage, a baby becomes capable of and learns what we call "object constancy." Before this developmental hurdle is achieved, the child does not have a sense of people or objects continuing to be available if they are no longer visible. Some of us, even as adults, struggle with this lack of constancy, perhaps because of disruption or trauma in our early lives. How can we be Christ to others who may constantly feel unsafe, dread evil [doers] and who doubt the continuing presence of God.

⁹ Alter notes that the shortness of this brief phrase, in contrast to the longer one preceding it (in both the Hebrew and the English] gives these words kind of a climactic effect. First there's a long phrase taking us through a place of *fear*, and then a short, succinct, and powerful affirmation of *trust*.

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***Your rod [to protect me] and Your staff [to guide],
they comfort me.***

***Your rod and Your staff they have comforted me.
Your rod and Your staff – it is they that console me.¹⁰
Your rod and Your staff¹¹ – they comfort me.***

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Notice that the rod and staff are not used to beat the sheep --- or to force them to go a certain direction -- but to guide and comfort. Have you noticed how anxious little children can be when there is lack of guidance and containment by the parent? The child is ultimately reassured by the parent's setting of limitations, even though as s/he explores and experiments with willfulness and running her own show. The rod and staff symbolically suggest the moral law, set up for the well-being of people, where we understand if we exceed certain limits, the outcome is damaging. As we affirm what is happening in our lives, we learn that as the Lord guides us, we do not lack. We lack nothing because of his leadership. We lack nothing because of these guidelines which are for our own growth and fulfillment. We lack nothing because he often prevents us from falling off a cliff.

Sheep know and are comforted by the rod and staff because they know they are safe. They provide protection. The shepherd with lambs uses a tender rod, gently tapping the lamb to bring them back when they are getting out of line. Sometimes we require a more severe discipline, but sheep are not beaten, *nor are we*.

In the book of Revelation and in Isaiah, it is said that he shall smite the nations with the rod of his mouth and slay the wicked by the breath of his lips. The rod of his mouth means that he speaks the truth correctly, in discipline. Love not only nourishes, and truth not only nourishes, but we are guided. Love disciplines us. It is a strong discipline, but never literally a beating – that is a figure of speech. The rod of his mouth is the truth that disciplines, the teaching that disciplines. And slaying the wicked with his breath means that he reproves injustices and greed.

- Can you recall a time that you rebelled against a limit? What did you learn? What did you learn when you exceeded a limit?

¹⁰ Alter says that at this critical time of fright and terror in the valley of the shadow, although the shepherd image is continued with the rod and staff, the speaker turns to God speaking to Him in the second person, 'You.'

¹¹ The *Tanakh* notes that the tools of the Shepherd, the rod and staff are implements used to both *prod* and *guide* the sheep, keeping them going in the right direction, and this is a metaphor for the comfort that comes with divine guidance.

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You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

***You have set tables before me in front of
[in the sight of] my enemies.***

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***You set out a table before me in the face of my foes.
You spread a table for me¹² in full view of my enemies;***

When we have been nourished and filled, and brought to a place of safety, we, like the Psalmist can rest in the presence of God, who hosts the Psalmist as well as us with luxurious care with a set or spread table.

The *Tanakh* commentary also says that some scholars interpret this Psalm as a picture of the post-exile period, a new exodus where the Israelites return to their land. If viewed in this way, one can see two parts as a unity. First God guides the people through their difficult journey coming from Babylonia, and then God hosts them at His own table, which represents the rebuilt Temple. Perhaps we can see a loose analogy between the two Hebrew exoduses and the Church which has also lost its way more than once when believers have failed to trust in God. Also the Shepherd metaphor continues to remind us that as the sheep are brought to pasture, to water, and across dangerous terrain, it is the loss of trust that poses the biggest risk. It should also be noted that Shepherd is a common Near Eastern metaphor for kings or royalty, which fits with God being a Shepherd-King.

Rocco Errico says that for the ancient mid-easterner, setting the table in front of enemies is not what we think of, e.g. where things are placed to look nice on the table. But rather, it is the supply of bread that is being referred to. God sets the table with abundant bread. What easterners looked for is how much bread do you have? A poor man's bread is made from barley, and the rich have wheat bread, and the very wealthy get white bread. Tables were very important in the ancient world. In those days, the primary entertainment was in people watching, seeing who had what, and folks were particularly observant of those with whom they were competitive. (I don't think things have changed very much!) Lamsa, a native Aramaic speaker who grew up in the Mideast, where Aramaic is still spoken in a few places, has

¹² Psalm 78:19 speaks of a table in the wilderness during the first exodus, which the *Tanakh* commentary says could support the idea that this psalm refers to the second exodus. While in the desert, the Israelites spoke against God, saying, "Can God spread a feast in the wilderness?" (v. 19) ...they did not put their trust in God, did not rely on His deliverance. So He commanded the skies above, He opened the doors of heaven and rained manna upon them for food, giving them heavenly grain. Each man ate a hero's meal [interpreted as 'food of the angels' in ancient texts]; He sent them provision in plenty" (v. 22-25).

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described the cultural background of this passage. He said that sometimes a family would go without, because when guests came, there had to be a great show of abundance at the table. This was especially so when one was hosting rivals or enemies. You do not want them at your table unless you can show off how well you are doing, how lavishly you serve them. The family might have been starving for a week but suddenly there would be so much bread flowing. You must have a lot. And when you are the guest, you cannot eat everything, because you would signal that you were very hungry and not in good circumstances yourself – leave lots of crumbs after a lavish feast! In a blessing, you would say, “May God increase your bread, may your grain be continual.” If you are served with a lot of meat, you say, “May God *not* increase your meat,” meaning that somehow you had had bad luck with your flock and some had been hurt and had to be slaughtered and eaten. Lamsa said they treat sheep like we treat dogs and cats here -- loving them -- and living off by-products as much as possible.

Who are our enemies or our competitors? This may be literal or metaphorical. In other words, our enemies may be within our own selves, and we are fully aware of our anxieties and fears. Our competitors may reside in us as well as externally; we may be at war with ourselves, seeking to feel important, cherished, valued and fearing that we are not. God’s table is spread before us and we know that we are cherished and singled out for his lavish care. We can have a full view of our fears, and we can confront them and *still be safe because* God prepares his table of plenty in the midst of all that is going on. The Eucharist is a continuation of the theme of the Table of Plenty!

- How has Jesus changed the purposes of being at Table compared to those in the era of the Psalmist and in Jesus’ era of eating with the Pharisees?
- Do you think that because we are all on an equal footing at God’s Table sharing the Eucharistic Meal, where none of us are better and none worse than another, that this opens us up to healing that may elude us in other settings?
- Today, at our retreat, take the time to light a candle and pray for one person with whom you have struggled with some kind of unresolved competition or jealousy.

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***For you are with me;
because you are with me.
For you are with me.***

Because You are with me, even though my enemies (within or without) do not necessarily go away, we still come to God's Table of Plenty! Whatever dangers we face, the Shepherd is with us! There are three parallel ways in this Psalm of repeatedly saying that God provides for us and is with us.

- (1) He has set tables before us in the presence of our enemies, which means we are prosperous and rest in God's high favor and need not be concerned about how we are evaluated by others.
 - (2) He has anointed our heads. We are pleased, lavished, and held.
 - (3) Our cup satiates our need. We are literally made drunk and continually filled by God. Perhaps this image suggests the coming of the Holy Spirit.
- These are three different ways to say the same thing. Why do you suppose the Psalmist said the same thing in multiple ways? Which one resonates the most with your own idea of completion and fulfillment? If you feel comfortable, compare notes with others on the retreat. Are there others who prefer a different image than you?
 - What is happening today that brings to mind your awareness of God with you – now? Light a candle and pray for healing for an internal or external enemy.
 - When you go back "down the hill," what reminders can you put in place to remember that God's provisions for you are entirely adequate to meet your needs?

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**You anoint my head with oil;
You have anointed my head with oil.
You moisten¹³ my head with oil,
You anoint my head with oil;**

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Sheep can be driven into complete mayhem and distress by the insects that plague them. The good shepherd applies repellants, dips, and shelters them to rid them of the parasites. As soon as he observes changes in their behavior, he must take steps to give them relief. Otherwise, the ewes will stop producing milk and the young will not continue growing. Some will be injured in their rushes in panic or in beating their heads in agony because of the torture of the parasites. The flies in their eyes could lead to blindness. But Phillip Keller, in his little book on being a Shepherd himself, said that there would be an immediate change once oil was applied to the sheep's head. He says he preferred a mix of linseed oil, sulphur and tar to be smeared over the sheep's head and nose to ward off the nose flies. The aggravation, frenzy, irritability, and restlessness was quelled and the sheep could begin to feed quietly after which she could lie down contentedly.

Being anointed is evidence of having been prospered. In those days, they'd use olive oil or butter, and it was a lavish experience. Kings, priests, and prophets were anointed when they were appointed, so in this imagery, we are appointed as his queens, priests, and prophetesses. In the east, butter and oil was used primarily for food, but when you have a lot of it, some is reserved for medicinal purposes for chapped hands or feet, and they will not anoint the head if they are poor. One is in abundant circumstances in order to anoint, especially the women with long hair.

In our lives, there will be no rest if we do not allow the Good Shepherd to assist us through all the irritations and distractions that constantly frustrate us. We only need to say, "O Master, this is beyond me! It's bugging me! I can't cope! Please take over and help me!"

Oil was also placed on the heads of one's guests at banquets. Remember Jesus confronting the Pharisee that when he entered the banquet? His head had not been anointed with oil, whereas the woman who came in from the street, anointed his feet.

- What experiences can you recall where you felt no possibility of relief for a time?
- Were there ways in which you harmed or hurt yourself as such a time?

¹³ Alter says that the verb used here, *dishen*, is not the same one that is used for anointing as in a sacramental act, but rather, it is more sensual, meaning something like "to make luxuriant," in other words, perhaps kind of like a head massage! All of the elements of a happy life are mentioned, e.g. a table, a head of hair well-rubbed with olive oil, and an overflowing cup of wine. It looks to me like God is spoiling us!

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- The Psalmist seems to imply anointing for relief and anointing to luxuriate. What experiences can you recall where you luxuriated in God's caring?
- How are we each kings or queens, and how are we priests called to bring God's revelation of truth and caring?
- Prophecy doesn't necessarily mean that one is foretelling the future. Rather, the prophet of old was one who was exquisitely sensitive to what was happening right now and could articulate for those around him/her the ways in which God was working. Perhaps we think of "intuition." In the Old Testament era, dreams were an important source of guidance, and – even today – within modern-day psychological conceptualizations and treatment approaches, dreams can provide incredible insight. What does the term mean, 'priesthood of all believers'? Is there an order of the laity, just as there is an order of the bishops and the deacons and presbyters? What unique insights and experiences does each order in the Kingdom of God bring to all of us? In what ways are we now able to prophesy and bring insight into God's plan for ourselves and those around us?

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***My [brimming cup] runs over.
And my cup satiates [enlivens, animates me;
makes me drunk; is running all the time and never stops].
My cup overflows.
My drink is abundant.***

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The Aramaic is said to be difficult to translate here. Errico says that it includes that the cup satiates us, or even intoxicates us, and in brimming over makes us drunk! Could this be a parallel with the New Testament experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit? My cup running over is not accurate in either Hebrew or Aramaic. Errico says they tried to express something that is very difficult. The best he felt could be said is that the cup satiates – he thinks that 'satisfies' is too weak because it seems closer to "adequate" than "complete." He says the word is not an adjective as in "brimming" or "abundant." It is a verbal adjective which expresses an action that *the cup itself* is doing something. It is something like 'My cup makes me drunk.' The idea of being full but so much that you have to handle it carefully as it will spill over. In most instances, they did not drink wine with their meals, but generally they drank buttermilk or water except on feast days, banquets, and special days. It is so overflowing that it is wasteful, again to show you are prosperous. We are spiritually prosperous in his Kingdom.

- Can you recall a time where you felt that what you received was far more than you expected, where you received an abundant gift that overwhelmed you?

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***Surely [or only] goodness, mercy, and unfailing love
shall follow me all the days of my life,***

***Your favor [goodness] and Your mercies [compassion] have
pursued me all the days of my life.***

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Let but goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life.

***Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue¹⁴ me
all the days of my life,***

Errico says that "follow" is too weak, that in the Aramaic, it is more like "pursued," meaning literally chased -- that God is hot on our trail -- relentlessly. He says it is the same word used for persecution! It is the same word in both Hebrew and Aramaic but in most texts a weaker word in translation does not convey the sense that God will chase us relentlessly with his goodness and compassion. In both Hebrew and Aramaic, it means literally to have someone chase you, to be at your heels! There is a poem by Francis Thompson (1859-1903) entitled "The Hound of Heaven" which conveys this same idea of how evasive we are and how persistent God is. In the 23rd Psalm, it is clear that God doesn't pursue us to *persecute* us in the sense of frightening or hurting us, but so anxious is he to give us goodness, mercy, and unfailing love. We might have been conditioned to think that God is the heavenly cop, looking for every wrong thing that we do, but the Psalmist tells us we are pursued because he desires to give us good things. We might also remember the New Testament story of the Prodigal Son who decides to return home to his father, and *the father seeing him from far off, runs out to greet him*, to put a ring on his finger, and to call for preparing a feast for him.

- What experiences have you had in religious settings, or heard related by others to whom you are close and about whom you care, that God persecutes, judges harshly, cuts off, punishes, or demeans? Is this consistent with the 23rd Psalm? How might you advise or help those around you who have experienced some form of spiritual abuse?
- How have you experienced God pursuing you? What awareness comes to your mind?

¹⁴ The *Tanakh* commentary says that 'goodness and steadfast love' are covenant blessings, that pursue the psalmist rather than a curse. (Deuteronomy 28:3, 15, 45: Blessed shall you be...but if you do not obey the Lord your God...All these curses...shall pursue you and overtake you....")

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**...and through the length of my days the house of the Lord
[and His presence] shall be my dwelling place.**

I shall live in the house of the LORD forever!

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long days.¹⁵

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long years.¹⁶

As long as there are days, I live in God's care. We are welcomed and received, God's favor is with us wherever we dwell. When the sheep grazing days are over and the Shepherds migrate back into the town, they return to bring gifts to the House of the Lord, in gratitude for their prosperity. Everyone has come back home safely and securely. We live life securely, abundantly, joyfully, and harmoniously, which is what it means to be in the dwelling place of the Lord for as long as we shall live.

- What are your own stories of returning home in gratitude?
- Have you experienced anything like the biblical story of the son who left home, who lived out some form of excessiveness, and then realized that you needed to return home? Describe how you were welcomed back.
- Today, how can you extend God's welcome to His Table to those around you who are hurting, alienated, lonely, scared, or confused? Think of one thing you can say or do *today* where you can be Christ to *one person*, bringing His healing.

¹⁵ Alter says the conclusion "for many long days" refers to the previous phrase, "all the days of my life," and doesn't mean "forever," as in eternity. From his standpoint, the poem is not speaking of the future so much as the here-and-now. "The speaker hopes for a happy fate all his born days, and prays for the good fortune to abide in the Lord's sanctuary – a place of security and harmony with the divine – all, or perhaps at least most, of those days." (Page 80).

¹⁶ The *Tanakh* commentary says that the house of the Lord is the Temple (Psalm 27:4). In other words, the Psalmist hopes to be in God's presence and for God to be accessible throughout a long lifespan. They think it implies a return to the land of Israel. To live a long life was considered a blessing from God, but in the Jewish tradition, it was also thought to refer to the next life and is often recited at funerals.

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