

The Lord is My Coach

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Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Psalm 23

The last time I shared a sermon on Psalm 23 was three years ago, almost to the day! It was April 25, 2021! Think back with me, though none of you were here in person! We had a skeleton crew of staff. Our liturgist that day was Dave Dyer. Our table was angled to face the camera! The doors were locked, and the pews were empty, literally. We began the service much like we did almost every week for 18 months. “We’re so glad you are all joining us online today from wherever you are.” It was an Earth Sunday, too, and we recalled with gratitude how seeking refuge in nature had been a profound source of healing and peace for many as we did our best to hold the almost daily grief and trauma of that mid-pandemic reality. Let me begin today by saying “Thank, God, we aren’t there anymore,” Amen! And, thank God for the resources of familiar songs and scriptures like Psalm 23 which continue to offer us grace and grounding!

Back then, I shared that a poet friend of mine had recently texted me a link to a website that a colleague of hers named Christie Towers had coded and created. Click on the site and it will bring you to a sparse, white page with just 12 lines of text, and each time you click on it, the content changes. It’s a poet-fed, though computer-generated, mad-lib version of Psalm 23. Refresh your browser and it’s a new version every time. Different words, same basic meaning, and same message... that God is always with us! Have any of you seen this or can you vaguely recall hearing about it? To give you all a sense, they start out like “O God, you are my teacher,” “you are my caregiver,” “you are my still, small voice,” “you are my sage,” “you are my sponsor,” “you are my DJ!” And it goes on from there.

Well, I revisited the site yesterday after I came home from Alice’s service. By the way, speaking of “the Lord is my Shepherd” did those of you who were at the service catch that in addition to Alice’s countless other jobs and projects, we should add shepherdess to her resume? Apparently, when she and the family lived in Berlin, CT, they won two little lambs at a fundraising auction for WGBH. The sheep safely grazed on their property, and they eventually came to realize that one was a ewe and one was a ram, and so the flock grew from there! Amazing, right? I imagine they never heard the opening line of Psalm 23 the same.

And yet check out the alternative that popped up on that Psalm 23 website yesterday, and with this, I want to pivot from thoughts and celebrations of Alice to someone else we’ll be saying farewell, too, later in today’s service, though in this case it’s only because she’s moving to the Midwest! Ready for a hot-off-the-press 2024 mad-lib of Psalm 23? Here goes, and see if this reminds of you anyone?

*Oh God, You are my coach;
I shall be wholly nourished.
You make me pay attention:
You lead me to a glass of wine.
You restore my will to power.
You lead me to love my siblings, for your name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through a world of lost truths,*

*I will fear no greed and power, for you are with me;
Your wisdom and kind heart soothes me.
You prepare a disco before me in the presence of anxieties.
You extend grace to me; my cup runs over.
Surely energetic joy, confident hope and reality in love will follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in Your safe haven forever. Amen.*

I mean, come on! Can you imagine a more perfectly suited version of Psalm 23 to send off our beloved Joanne Paul! The Lord is my Coach! Takes one to know one, right? You prepare a disco before me? Yes, it's Earth Day, but if you know Joanne, every day is Earth Day, if not "Earth, Wind and Fire" day! Her favorite song is September! And how 'bout that penultimate line? "Surely energetic joy, confident hope and reality in love" will follow her all the days of her life. Maybe we should be putting a little more faith in AI, after all!

Well, I kept clicking, which of course is the shadow side of the internet! Even this very simple no-frills site is kinda addictive! But this time I was clicking and looking for mad-lib versions that might be fitting for our baptizands! Yes, there may be nothing quite so gentle, pastoral or baptismally refreshing as the images of being made to lie down in green meadows, or being led by still waters, but check out what else this poetically prompted website presented on my screen:

You make me lie down...
*in tide pools,
on warm sheets...
in sweet meadows...
on bean bag chairs
Or to visit the lakeshore
or to float on a raft in the ocean under the bright sun*

You lead me...
*to the river,
to healing waters,
to birdsong,
to the library,
to classical music,
to consider the moon,
to my community,*

Sounds nice right? Welcome in, new siblings of every age, newly baptized, the water feels pretty good here - refreshing, restoring!

And of course, the mad-libs continue. I can't help myself! I know I did much the same the thing three years ago, but I promise this material is fresh!

You restore...
*My heart,
My life force,
My ignition of happiness*

*My spark of the Divine
my music,
You restore the God inside of me.*

Yea, though I walk...
*through separation from my loved ones,
Exhaustion,
financial scarcity,
emotional poverty,
through the post-capitalist hellscape of abandoned Main Street and factories and homes*

I will fear *no danger*
I will fear *no solitude...*
I will fear *no clowns...*
I will fear *no change...*

For you are with me...
And this line she doesn't change!
For you are with me!
For you are with me!
For you are with me!
Every time!

You prepare...
a buffet...
a block party...
[even] a disco...
parade before me

before me in the presence of...
of former friends
of self-doubts
of evil doers
of people who don't listen.

I'm going to save the last lines for the end, but you get the idea. It's a whimsical and fun little exercise, and 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 to it in the online print version but please feel free to go ahead and google "Christie Towers Psalm 23" later!¹

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 it knowing that we'd have baptisms galore, and that our hearts would be tender today, given too many goodbyes for one weekend let alone for one season! Today, I'm,

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

grateful for the ways that Psalm 23, in whatever version – even the majestic King James version that an anglophile colleague used to tell me was of course the version used in heaven - Psalm 23 offers to hold it all. It holds the peace and the sadness at a beloved one's leave-taking, the joyful and refreshing assurance of God's love in community that comes baptism, the celebration of Creation's splendor! Alleluia! In all times and places, for you are with me! For you are with me! For you are with me! Can you feel that here and now? God's companionship on our journeys. God's presence at the great banquets of life. God's enduring love through it all, and the remembrance that no matter where we are – here or online, in Massachusetts and Minnesota, we all come home to the same place, ever “welcome in” to that safety and dwelling space of our true home which is God.

Ok, I have yet one more version, and this is one for the road, because I know we are all about to enter into a very full and busy season. School vacation week is almost over. A push of final papers looming. 'Tis almost the season for graduations and weddings and some other leave-takings! So, this is called “Psalm 23 for Busy People”. I have shared it before, but this time I've changed the gender, just because. It's a Japanese translation by Toki Miyashina!

*The Lord is my Pace-setter, I shall not rush;
She makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals.
She provides me with images of stillness,
which restores my serenity.
She leads me in ways of efficiency
through calmness of mind,
and Her guidance is peace.
Even though I have a great many things
to accomplish each day,
I will not fret, for Her presence is here;
Her timelessness, Her all importance,
will keep me in balance.
She prepares refreshment and renewal
in midst of my activity,
By anointing my mind with Her 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 Her house forever.*

Psalm 23. We can't hear it enough! Do yourselves a favor if you haven't already and pick out a favorite version, and memorize! It might be the one we'll all sing at the end of the service today. Find one that allows you to hear its constantly refreshing invitation. Trust again and again its great wisdom 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 sanctuary, the acceptance, the home, the love of God*, for all your days. Amen!