

“Meeting Psalm 23 Again for the First Time”

March 2, 2008

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It was called “Slippery Rock” by the locals. If memory serves, it was somewhere between Cannon Mountain and Mt. Mooseilauke, behind an old white farm house sitting in a small green field. There were never any tourists there; it was one of those gorgeous secret spots off the beaten track that you have to go a little bit out of your way to get to. Having made friends with some local residents, we young folks just on the cusp of adulthood working at a nearby grand hotel for the summer were treated to sojourns to beautiful places that you’d only know about if you lived nearby. On a hot, humid summer day, you’d want to go to Slippery Rock. Picture a cold, dancing mountain stream you can float down, with places to wade and occasional pools you could get right into up to your neck. And, of course, the perfect natural rock slide—“Slippery Rock”— that would deposit you right into one of those cool, refreshing pools after a thrilling ride over smooth granite in a whoosh of fresh, clean, clear White Mountain water. In some ways, the best part was the wonderful calm, cool feeling that would stay with you for hours even on a hot day; you felt soothed and refreshed to the core. The thing is, if you want to feel the benefit of a cool mountain stream on a hot day, you actually have to get **in** to the water.

God who is our shepherd has promised us such refreshment in many places in scripture; one of the most beloved places such solace is offered is in the 23rd Psalm. In almost five years as a hospital chaplain, I noticed that when folks were inclined to ask for a specific prayer, the 23rd Psalm was the one most frequently mentioned. So powerful are its soothing images that reciting it seemed to bring instant relief to many; to all, it seemed to readily evoke emotional release. The psalm, and also, I noticed, the Lord’s Prayer, also seemed to have the power to reach through the fog of dementia. If Grandpa Joe has Alzheimer’s disease and can’t remember the names of his kin, chances are if he was a church going fellow, he’ll be able to say this Psalm or the Lord’s Prayer right along with you. It’s true that most of us can probably remember this Psalm, and we absolutely love its green pastures and still waters, its promise of restoration, and right paths, its assurance of God’s presence even in the darkest of times, its promise of protection by the Shepherd God who carries a rod and staff for our own good.....and let’s not forget the promise of a table prepared, the honor of anointing, the abundance of an overflowing goblet....and if all that weren’t enough, never ending goodness and mercy, and an open invitation to live in the house of God forever. God’s relational gifts to us are pretty much summed up in these gorgeous words.

It is a rite of passage for children in our culture to spend at least some time lying in the green grass of summer looking up at the sky. It is especially fun when there are puffy white clouds floating by in the blue, because wonderful shapes begin to be apparent in the clouds. If you have experienced a lack of elephant sightings lately, or you are hoping to catch a glimpse of a dragon or a lion, or perhaps an ocean worthy vessel in full sail, put on your list of things to do this summer a nice long stint lying on your back in a field on a blue sky day and look up. The thing is, to let your mind rest enough to see the images in the clouds, you’ve got to lie right down in that green meadow, give over your imagination, and give the shapes some time to register.

The table at which we gather today is a symbolic reminder of God's presence with us at all times and in all places. Being the unruly flock we are, not much liking the idea of being "sheep," we tend to forget about God traveling the dark valleys with us. In fact, it is often our habit to actually blame God for the dark times. We sort of get confused, thinking that God is only around when things are good.

Psalm 23, the one that so fully develops the image of God as our Shepherd, says otherwise. It certainly affirms that all that is good comes from God, but when we are separated from what is good through our own foolishness or through tragedy, God is still right there, trying to get us to take some refreshment from his table and find some peace in his green meadow. The Good Shepherd never fails his flock.

The thing is, to really know the ways of the Shepherd, the sheep need to stay near him, to graze in his verdant meadow, to dip into his restoring stream.....
Amen.