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John 10:11-18
Psalm 23

Green Pastures & Dark Valleys

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"Once upon a time…"
The first words of a story are memorable,
"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."
They are an invitation, an initiation if you will,
"A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..."
perhaps even an incantation.
"In the beginning God created…"
Sometimes they're borrowed words:
"In the beginning was the word…"

From my earliest days, I've always been captivated by stories. Whether it was the stories I heard from my family, the stories I read about or learned about in school, the stories from my favorite television show, *Arthur*, or the stories of our faith, the stories of our past.

There is something about getting lost in a story. Research even suggests,[1] that getting "lost in a story" is good for us – apparently, this helps us develop social connection, and it even helps us feel connected to something bigger. Part of what draws us to a story is the promise of finding… a different world, finding another time, finding even ourselves. We are a people shaped by stories, and I'm convinced that within each of us is a deep desire, a hunger, that yearns for story – and a good story, at that – a story that returns us to ourselves.

Whatever the case, we search for stories, and stories find us.

Not only did a ***word*** speak the world into being, but as followers of Christ, our lives are shaped and formed by ***the*** Word. Elie Wiesel says that God created us because **God loves stories.**

I had the great honor and privilege of walking with our Confirmands over the past few months. The confirmation journey is a sacred, holy space, but it is beyond anything I or we can do – **because God confirms, not us.** Because of this, confirmation became a space-making practice, to open ourselves to stories. Stories of scripture. Stories of faith. Stories of promise. Stories that help us recognize God's presence among us.

[1] https://www.nbcnews.com/better/pop-culture/why-getting-lost-book-so-good-you-according-science-ncna893256

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Our psalm today is one we know well. Perhaps some of *YOU* memorized it when *YOU* were confirmed. I didn't come from a tradition where one was confirmed, but memorizing biblical passages was HUGE. Psalm 23 begins with a metaphor, an *image,* that gives us just a *glimpse,* of who God is.

Now, Psalm 23 isn't a story, it's a poem. But like a good story or poem, it points beyond, towards the depths of our own experiences, to other stories from our own lives, and even other stories in scripture – stories that form the tapestry of who we are.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

This is a psalm about trust, in the very first line it invokes *utter* confidence in God – and it's a claim all the more shocking in Hebrew, because the proper name for God is being translated. To say that the *LORD* is ***my*** shepherd is a remarkable thing, because it's deeply intimate. But because sheep are a part of a flock, it's an intimate relationship in the context of community.

He makes me lie down in Green Pastures.

Literally, in pastures of fatness – lush // rich.

And there, by the still waters,
our entire being is restored.

There's a story in the book of Acts, about a centurion in the Italian Company, a Gentile-God worshipper, named Cornelius. He has a vision to seek out Peter, an apostle. So Peter comes to Cornelius' house, and enters. Now what you need to know about this story is that for Peter, as a Jew, it would be considered unclean for him to enter the home of a Roman centurion – it would have been scandalous.

But you see, Peter ***also*** had a vision.

In his vision, God shows him a collection of animals considered unclean, and God tells him to eat them. But Peter says to God, "I've never eaten anything impure." But God says, "don't call impure what I have made pure." And that was the end of the vision. Now, Peter isn't going to break his Jewish customs and change his diet. That's not what was happening. He realizes that God is telling him something else. God is declaring these people, not as impure, but a part of God's family.

So the story continues.

There's a baptism, and the Spirit moves among them. And then there is this small detail, noted briefly. "Then they ***invited*** Peter to stay for several days."

"This is what God wants, Jews with Gentiles, Gentiles wanting to be with Jews, and together they eat and live-in peace. And in a quiet corner of the Roman Empire, in the home of a centurion, a rip

in the fabric of space and time has occurred." And fellowship and love overflow in the desert and life flourishes.

In our busy days of work, of school, of endless deadlines. God our Shepherd, makes us slow down. Pause. Rest in the fullness of life – together. And our entire *being* is restored.

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.

I love the artwork on our bulletin today because it's a beautiful image filled with color – mountains, lush pastures, sheep – and at the very center, darkness, a deep shadow in the valley.

In life, and in faith, we encounter the valley of shadows. It's inescapable. A phone call at 2:00 a.m. A test result that knocks the wind out of us. A friend who betrays us. A note from a school that you haven't been accepted.

In his book, *In the Shelter: Finding a home in the world,* Pádraig Ó Tuama tells the story of Wendy Farley. Wendy is a theologian who, at the tender age of forty-one, lost her ability to read. At the time, she was getting out of a bad situation at home – a husband who had become a danger to her – and in the midst of this very difficult moment and her heavy story, "her body, her eyes, her brain, or something, decided that of all things to sacrifice, reading should be it."

Even so, Wendy continued to teach during this tough time. She needed income to live. So she wrote a book, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire,* even while not being able to read. Most, if not all, of the references in her book are actually references to the folk songs she listened to when, as she says, "the lights went out of my reading."

Padraig comments on this: "It is as if her body decided that she had read enough, and that she now needed to live from the wisdom she sang, the wisdom she listened to, and the uncategorized wisdom of memory and fable. She quotes great theologians, but from memory, not from citation. It is their flavor, not their purity, that influences her writing and, in so doing, she created a theology that is story and survival. It is unique and, while I wouldn't wish the experience on anyone." Padraig continues, "I am glad that she wrote, even while she couldn't read. Hello to the stories we would never choose."

Even in the darkest shadows, the darkest hours and moments of our lives, we are never alone. We carry within us the wisdom, the songs, the stories, the very presence – of Emmanuel, God with us.

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You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

"The people of Israel celebrated a God who led them through the death-shadowed valleys of life, again and again. They know that God will bring them toward overflowing tables of food and wine."[2]

When Michael Brown was shot and killed, the Rev. Traci Blackmon, a former pastor at a church in Ferguson, Missouri, opened up the doors of her church to protestors fleeing pepper spray and rubber bullets.

A few years back now, I got to attend a conference and heard her speak. At one point, she told a story of a couple she knew who arrived early one morning to the place where protestors and police officers had both lined the streets. This couple pulled up in a truck, and started unloading tables and setting them up, then one by one they began unloading huge pots of food that their grandmother had been preparing all night. They put plates and utensils on the ends of the tables. And then the woman said aloud for all to hear, even the policemen who were standing on the other side, "Anybody who is hungry, ya'll come eat."

The Rev. Blackmon said, "Because I look for God, what I saw was communion. I saw communion that was more holy than anything that was held inside the four walls of my beautiful sanctuary."

The biblical vision isn't one of scarcity.
It's a vision rooted in abundance.

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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.

The psalmist ends on such a confident note. Scripture promises that God's *hesed – God's* steadfast love – will always follow us – and in turn, we'll want to steadfastly love.

But what of doubt. And what about questions that go unanswered.

I'm reminded of a song we always used to sing at my church. It's a Spanish corito, and it goes like this:
Si tuvieras fe como grano de mostaza
Eso lo dice Senor
Tu le dirias a la montana
Muevte, muevete y
Esa montana se movera, se movera, se movera

[2] I point you towards this wonderful writing from my Hebrew professor, as he reflects on Psalm 23 knowing that he has incurable cancer: https://reformedjournal.com/i-am-not-alone/

It echoes the words of Matthew 17:20, which reads:

"Jesus said to them, "truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

This song has constantly been a reminder that no matter what challenges come along, and through all the doubt I would have, through my unbelief, I simply had to keep my faith. If you have the smallest, but most genuine faith, with God, you can do all things. It isn't our own faith that we must trust, but the faithfulness of God.

Our Confirmands, like all of us, will experience many pastures, and many valleys. But no matter what, we'll always be welcome at the overflowing table of God's steadfast love. And nothing can separate us from that Love.

Each of us carries our own particular stories, unique, wounded, beautiful, difficult, and hard, and yet each of us carries a belovedness that comes from a God who loves us, calls us, invites us, and names us.

Again and again, we are called to new beginnings; to an abundant life, to witness and serve. This is our story. Even when we might not have the greatest faith, even when we're walking down the darkest valley, even when we're in the midst of struggle, God our Shepherd, is with us, no matter what. And that is indeed good news for us this Eastertide.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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