

By: Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow

Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow is President of the American Baptist Churches of New York State Board of Missions.

Revisiting the 23rd Psalm

This Psalm is so familiar, it is the very first Bible verse I ever memorized back in my teens. Frankly when I see it as a text for prayer and study in my weekly reflections I always am tempted to just gloss over it, or say it from memory and move on. But this morning I decided to see if I could seek a renewed understanding of this very familiar text.



I rest in the comfort of the Lord as my shepherd. He makes me lie down, he *pleads* with me to lie down in the safety of his pastures: lie down and smell the earth - green and brown. He begs me to see and appreciate all of the tiny creatures that move in the earth to break it down, to make it fertile loam for growing and feeding all the creatures of the earth. The soil is broken down and becomes fertile ground, just as when we are broken and wounded by life's misfortunes we become fertile ground for the seeds of God's word to germinate, sprout and bear fruit. Just as a seed cannot grow in soil that is hard or packed too tight, God's word cannot bear fruit in one whose heart is hard or too up tight.

He leads me beside still waters to calm my soul, to nourish the parts of myself that are dry and bitter, to feel the calm in my body that is rich earth where the seeds sown by my Lord may grow and flourish and bear much fruit. Still waters calm my soul, but there is also a peace that comes from flowing waters, watching them journey on to the sea. They keep flowing, the fount of which does not run dry. We respond to water because we *are* water. We cannot live without water. Water is the stuff of life.

My Lord as my shepherd leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. He leads me on a journey of excitement and wonder and unexpected joy! He leads me to have fun in his name! He leads me, and when I follow my shepherd, when I do not stray, I am a better wife, mother, grandmother, aunt, sister, and friend.

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And yet even then, there are times when dark valleys surround me and I am tempted and afraid. But the Psalmist reminds me that my hope is in the Lord, and I need not fear, for God is with me. (Ps. 118:6, Ps. 27:1-2, Ps. 39:7, Ps. 121:1...) God does not abandon me but continues to lead and guide me even through these rough times. His rod fends off the enemy, and his staff gently nudges and subtly pushes me in the direction he wants me to go. I am comforted in the awareness that God is still with me, even here in this dark and foreign place, and I can trust that - even here - he will lead me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. You give me courage to Love my neighbor even in the company of those who would be my enemies. You give me the words to justify love and mercy; sharing your grace with all those with whom I come into contact.

Therefore, *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.* I am “now pursued by God’s goodness and mercy instead of by enemies and persecutions.”* We call it the peace of Christ that “surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7) the peace of Christ that “rules our heart” (Colossians 3:15), the peace of Christ that comes “not as the world gives it.” (John 14:27). It is the peace that dwells in our hearts, regardless of what is happening in the world around us. I read somewhere that: *Sometimes the Lord calms the storm, and sometimes he lets the storms rage - and he calms the child.*

The peace of Christ must *within us*, because we have no control over another’s reaction to our attempt at goodness; we are not in charge of what the response may be. But we can know in our very soul that we harbor no ill will or resentment against another. The Christ was crucified because those in power so feared the power that Jesus possessed to attract the multitudes in their poverty and destitution and the rebellion that grew in their hearts for just treatment through the power of that love. And so the earthly powers, as they always do, used fear and intimidation to try to quell the movement - they tortured and killed the leader and threatened those who followed him with the same. But the leader would not be killed, even crucifixion and death could not contain him. He rose, and his spirit and his words continue to bear fruit to this very day through the broken and wounded people who hear his message of mercy, love, and forgiveness, and continue to trust and to follow in his name.

Even though I go through the darkest valley, I am not afraid, for you are with me...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. Amen

*See note, pg. 820, HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, 1989.

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