



From the Pulpit: August 1, 2021
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Psalm 23:2

How To Love The World Again, II: Kingdom

**“Red Thyme” by Laura Ann Reed from
*How to Love the World, Poems of Gratitude
and Hope***

In the red thyme
that crawls
languidly
between stepping stones
time stops
as bees
thrust their passion
deep into the promise
of tiny crimson-purple
blooms.
*Where blossom
ends
and bee
begins*
are the first words
of a lullaby
the world sings
while it rocks you
as you fall
awake
in the later years
of a life
spent mostly
sound
asleep.

Psalm 23 by Robert Alter

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
In grass meadows He makes me lie down,
by quiet waters guides me.
My life he brings back.
He leads me on pathways
of justice
for his name’s sake.
Though I walk in the vale of
death’s shadow,
I fear no harm, for you are
with me.
Your rod and your staff—
it is they that console me.
You set out a table before me
in the face of my foes.
You moisten my head with oil,
my cup overflows.
Let but goodness and kindness
pursue me
all the days of my life.
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for many long days.

“I’ve been to the
meadow. I’ve seen the
stream. I know this
place. It is of great
comfort. My body can
relax. The table is set.
All is made ready.”

Something happens when I hear Psalm 23. A grassy meadow. A quiet stream. My mind understands this kind of visual image. I've been to the meadow. I've seen the stream. I know this place. It is of great comfort. My body can relax. The table is set. All is made ready.

The possibility of flourishing draws near. No one has to wait in line. No one's need is met with scarcity. The green pasture and still water of Psalm 23 means all are equally fed, the youngest lamb and the oldest sheep, the smallest and the largest, the strongest and the weak. No one has to argue or fight. There is enough. No one spot is better than another. It is all green pastures. It is all still waters.

If you've been to Abiquiu, New Mexico to the sacred place where Georgia O'Keeffe painted her sparse abstract desert landscapes, you will find yourself adjacent to the Rio Chama snaking across the terrain. All else is scrub brush and stone, but right up against the river, in a compliment of vibrant green, a fragile yet sturdy ecosystem reminds you that water is life. Cottonwoods, willows, boxelders and hackberry trees send down deep roots at rivers edge so the sudden high desert rains or mountain snowmelt does not flood them, and so they can drink deep of the river's nourishment in times of drought. Any number of animals make their way to water's edge, especially at dawn or dusk: elk, black bear, bobcat, coyote as well as the local farmer's livestock.

Many thousands of years ago, it would have been the North American Woolly Mammoth meandering down to the Rio Chama to drink. But it wasn't until the early 1600s that colonists, the Franciscan Friars, added sheep to the river habitat.

Until I looked, verse by verse, at Psalm 23 alongside the geography of New Mexico's Rio Chama,

I would have thought the shepherd's grand gesture of providing a grassy meadow and a quiet stream would have been a simple act of generosity. I typically envision an idyllic scene, a storybook picture of babbling brooks, sheep grazing lazily nearby. It is easy to forget how much labor is involved in creating a safe environment at a waterfront where other animals might appear, themselves in search of water. Coyotes, bobcats, black bears? Early in the morning, the stream might be teeming with wildlife that a shepherd would have to contend with. Imagine trying to ward off a black bear? Or a bobcat? Even before dawn a hypervigilant lookout has to be awake to protect the flock.

"The intimacy of the sheep knowing the shepherd's voice. It takes trust. Relationship. We cannot get green pastures and still water without the shepherd."

Maybe that's why the Trappist Monks who make their home on the Rio Chama awaken at 3:15 a.m. to pray. They know the Good Shepherd is awake then too.

The Good Shepherd first has to create a context of safety for the sheep. Without that the sheep cannot lay down in green pastures. It takes vigilance. Maybe a sheepfold. Years of experience guarding a flock. The intimacy of the sheep knowing the shepherd's voice. It takes trust. Relationship. We cannot get green pastures and still water without the shepherd.

Then, there's the expectation of green pastures in the first place. In the ancient near east, there were no manicured lawns, no sophisticated underground lawn irrigation system with well timed dawn and dusk sprinklers, there were no fleet of semi trucks to move flocks of sheep from one seasonally green pasture, there was no Wi-Fi enabled surveillance system to know when one pasture or another was just green enough.

Green pastures were not a given. (And still are not: a friend said her son was driving this week to the West Coast and hit a wall of smoke somewhere between here and the Rocky Mountains...where our country's fires burn, there can be no green pasture).

Green pastures were not a given. If your shepherd is leading you to lay down in green pastures, your shepherd has to be socially and relationally adept as well, seeking access to land, grazing rights, and safe entrance for the flock. And that is only if the land is not in a season of drought, or a year of drought. Is there even a green pasture nearby? The shepherd has many worries in order to provide for the flock.

Third, still waters are at a premium. Like New Mexico's Rio Chama with its bank of deep rooted trees, the ancient near eastern waterways might be at any given movement in a season of drought or flood. In drought the rivers might run dry but flash flooding can just as easily trouble the water. We know this all too well after July brought flooding events of

historic magnitude to both Germany and China. Western Germany saw two months of rain in just two days. In China, a deluge flooded the railway tunnels, torrents of water overtook the streets, and the riverbanks burst as a year's worth of rain fell in just three days.

So I admit. In the past I have overlooked the amount of work it takes to find both green pastures and still waters, and to provide enough safety for the sheep to eat, drink, and rest. Today it seems like a miracle. Well, that the very grass in my yard is still alive after that late spring drought is a miracle. But most days I just walk on by. The same too for this verse in Psalm 23. I just walk on by. "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters," It is too familiar. It is too utopian. It is too cliched. I walk on by.

So let us notice. Let us notice the miracle of this green pasture and quiet water. It may be a commonplace miracle, an ordinary miracle, one miracle out of many, but even still green pastures, and still water are offered as part of Psalm 23's narrative of provision set alongside the sacred mystery of God in shepherd garb. This is no accident or twist of fate. Something happened here so that there would be fields of grass and river rations enough for all.

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Maybe like us the sheep need poets. From the perspective of the sheep from their meadow, from their green pasture, do the sheep ask, like poet Laura Foley “What luck, or fate, instinct, or grace brought me here?—in shade, beneath hidden stars, a soft summer morning, seeing with my whole being, love made visible.” Can sheep live in the moment, appreciate the abundance of pasture and stream? Or does the moment pass them by too? Does their capacity to notice the good day or the good hour diminish as the good hours and good days stack up, one indistinguishable from the next?

How do we keep alert to the reality of our grassy meadows and quiet waters? How do we stay awake to the gift of this day, this moment? All we have is now. As poet R. S. Thomas says, “Life is not hurrying on to a receding future nor hankering after an imagined past. It is turning aside like Moses to the miracle of the burning bush, to a brightness that seemed as transitory as your youth once, but is the eternity that awaits you.”

In his essay reflection about the Kingdom at Hand from this sermon series’ poetry collection “How to Love the World,” Ross Gay says, “the gate to the kingdom at hand remains open any time we choose to pass through.” In other words, the effervescent now, this moment, today, the only moment we truly have, can always be unpacked, met, seen. The ground beneath your feet, recognized as sacred. The breath in your body, rising and falling. The heartbeat within you, perceived. The thoughts in your mind, quieted. The worries, seen and handed over to the shepherd.

When the rain comes flooding, when the drought comes, when the day comes to a close unexpectedly, when the thing that felt like it would go on forever ends, can we still like poet e. e. cummings, say, “around me surges a miracle of unceasing birth and glory and death and resurrection.” One way to love the world again is to see it, to notice it, to be open to it, to praise God for it, to be alive to it, even when the green pastures and still waters are fleeting, just a passing moment between *that* valley of the shadow of death and the next.

Noticing the green pastures and still waters does not mean that there will be *no* valley, that there will be *no* shadow, that there will be *no* death. But in the noticing, we have a chance to remake the world, to reframe and become anew who we are meant to be in this life. In the noticing, we become like poet Rebecca Baggett who puts it this way: “I want to say, like Neruda, that I am waiting for ‘a great and common tenderness,’ that I still believe we are capable of attention, that anyone who notices the world must want to save it.” If we want to love the world again, we will need that ‘great and common tenderness.’ If we want to love the world again, we must want to save it.

Maybe poet Julia Fehrenbacher is right when she says, “the truth is if we slowed down and got close enough we wouldn’t be able to handle the beauty.” If you slow down today, and get close enough to the unbearable beauty of this life, where will you see the green pastures and still waters?

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