

“Shepherd me o God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.”

Over the past week and a half I have been unpacking box after box after box of “stuff,” arranging furniture, and putting things away in new places as I attempt to make our new house a home. I have been working on making each room a place that is welcoming, pleasant, and satisfying to the senses. As I have been doing this work, I have been giving a great deal of thought to what home is and what home means for me. We all long for a sense of home. I think we often have this deep, soulful, idyllic sense of home, something we find articulated in our songs and poetry. It appears in works such as Stephen Foster’s plaintive “Old Folks at Home” or Dvorak’s “Going Home.” And then there is that well-known inscription printed on all kinds of plaques and memorabilia, “Home Sweet Home.”

The great Maya Angelou once said, “The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.”

There is a certain ache for home that does exist within every person – that longing for a place where feelings of security, belonging, placement, family, protection, memory, personal history, hope, joy and all the good things in life are met. And, I think that longing and searching for home, whether we

realize it or not, is probably rooted in our seeking, in our searching for God's presence. In fact, that longing for home can be something that ultimately leads us to create space, create room within the deepest part of ourselves, for the life-giving presence of God, for a place where God happens.

As I reflected upon today's scripture readings, I realized that the well-known, beloved, familiar words of Psalm 23 really speak to this deep longing within each of us. This Old Testament passage has provided comfort and peace to people throughout the centuries. However, the familiarity of the words can sometimes hinder the reader from truly entering into the depth of its meaning. So, let's take a closer look at this beautiful scripture passage.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." I shall not want? Wanting! It seems to me that we spend a great deal of time wanting in this consumer driven culture. In fact, our entire economy is driven by our wanting as marketing specialists bombard us with ads and commercials that suggest we desperately need everything the free market has to offer. We find ourselves wanting and believing we need all kinds of creature comforts, stuff like the new Apple Watch, the latest model in car design or the most recent fashions worn at fashion shows or maybe even the

Academy Awards. We need more of anything that will numb our pain and gloss over our anxieties. We need to have our kids involved in as many sporting activities, arts activities and competitions, whatever, to make sure they succeed and do better than we have done. And, heaven forbid that we or our kids should be bored. We really need to give our kids everything they might possibly want and keep them as well as ourselves entertained. Oh, yes, we want so much. We want good health, a life free of trouble and sorrow, well-behaved children, the perfect lawn, the list goes on and on. And, we also want a church where there will never be disagreement or change. We do not want to do something new or different. And, we want worship experiences, education experiences and community life that will always be upbeat, fun and entertaining. We really do want it all.

And, guess what? We pay a very heavy price for all of this wanting. Not only does wanting affect our pocket books, it also creates stress that affects our health, our family relationships and our community relationships. Many psychologists will tell you anxiety is at an all-time high in people's lives. Many of our health issues and relationship problems are rooted in our anxieties. Trying to fill the deep desire within us with "stuff" simply does not bring us the rest we so desire and need. So, just what would happen if we trusted that indeed God **is** our shepherd? Just what if we trusted that in

God we do **not need** to want, that in him we already have all we **truly** need?

I do not intend to make this sound too simplistic and the truth is, wanting is a very important aspect of being human. Wanting a place of safety, wanting a place where we can truly be ourselves and wanting meaningful relationships are very good things. Fulfilling this aspect of our desire enables us to live into a real sense of wholeness and well-being which God intends for humanity. However, when we look at Psalm 23, we can discover that our deepest wants are truly met in God.

Yes, God is the one who truly loves us, accepts us as we are and so deeply cares for each one of us that God brings rest to our souls. “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” As I continue to think about home, I have begun to realize that God takes us on a journey that leads us into home. This home is not our physical, material dwelling. It is a home that is found in the very heart of God. It is a place where we can find rest when we are weary. This is a place of letting go, a place where we can let go of all the worries, let go of our need to control, even let go of the people and relationships that gnaw at our being. This is a place where we can simply be and simply receive. As we lie down in green pastures beside the still waters, our soul is

restored because we discover that **all** is gift. Everything we have, all that we are is simply gift given to us by a very gracious God.

And this gift of God's presence, as we are led into green pastures, is so certain that we can trust it even in the darkest places of life. "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." All of us face pain. All of us have been wounded. And, at some point in life, each one of us will likely find ourselves in a place where the darkness seems void of the light of God's presence. However, we have been given the promise that the Good Shepherd walks with us in the darkness and is closer to us than the air we breathe. In fact, in the person of Jesus, we discover that God loves us so deeply, God has entered into our experience of darkness and entered into solidarity with us. In the person of Jesus, God became flesh to get as close to us as possible, just to be with us to share in our struggles and our pain. Yes, the psalmist tells us that even the darkest places of our lives are permeated with the presence of this God who shares the darkness and is lovingly walking with us.

The psalmist also clearly understands human nature and knows this world. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." The psalmist knows there is no

promise of life without enemies or evil. The psalmist assures us that even as we are surrounded by enemies, there is a table prepared for us. A table – **this** table – the place for fellowship and communion, the place for being with God and one another. A table – **this** table – the place where the cup of God’s presence overflows and the place where God happens as we eat and drink of the very life of God. The place where we are weekly nourished and fed to face all that the coming week may bring. A table – **this** table – the place where God’s goodness and mercy generously sustain us for all the days of our lives.

Yes, “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.” As I continue the work of making my new house a home, I know that my life is really a journey into home. And, each and every day of this journey is all gift as the Good Shepherd draws and guides me ever more deeply into my **real** home – the gracious, loving heart of God. That is where I am truly home. That is where I find the rest and nourishment I need. That is where I find the life I need as I continually grow **into** God’s eternal life – life that truly matters.