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Post Pandemic Praxis: A Meditation on Psalm 23



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ABSTRACT

As universities and colleges begin to define ways to move forward in a post-COVID year, Psalm 23 offers some thoughtful practices for how to return to a new normal while still dealing with the side effects of pandemic pivoting. This article considers what provisions the Lord offers through the paradigm of Psalm 23. This Psalm offers helpful perspective, context, an overarching vision of life, and specific steps that are vital in recovering from valley experiences as people move towards a restored and flourishing new normal.

Introduction

As we move into the new academic year after experiencing the impact of COVID-19 on our library operations and protocols, it is important to take some time to reflect on where we are, how we are doing, and how we can be prepared to move forward with excellence. A recent issue of *The Christian Librarian* (vol. 64:1) offered many stories about how academic libraries responded to COVID-19 in the thick of it. Now we must consider how to get ready for next steps. What has God provided to prepare for this coming year? Are there things we should be aware of that Scripture outlines about moving from a season of challenge and disruption to a season of productivity and accomplishment? What does the Lord expect of his servants as we transition to a new paradigm? How can we as Christians understand and prepare to embrace our future, especially the unknown? How do we see beyond the concerns and grasp the opportunities that will arise?

We can all probably quote Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV) by heart. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord. “Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” Hope and a future. What might that entail? Likely this past year has felt anything BUT prosperous and hopeful. For many it has been a trudge through a valley of darkness and uncertainty, complete with loss and cuts and unwanted changes with a scant scattering of light here and there. It has been something of a continuous disruption that kept getting worse and just wouldn’t go away. But now, as we are emerging from these complex impacts, how do we know the best way to move forward? God knows the plan, but how do we learn it? What hope and future does God have in store for us? To answer these questions, I want to explore the riches of Psalm 23, a very familiar song that ends with goodness, mercy, and a future with God – for surely that is where we want to go.

Psalm 23 starts off in a good place, a desirable place filled with comfort and plenty and health and happiness. There is no mention of stress or worries or lack. This season is like where many of us resided before COVID. The first 3 verses – fully half of the Psalm – talk about normalcy, about meeting basic needs, of feeling loved and nurtured, cared for and functional. During such a season, we experience God’s goodness, we learn that we can depend on him and that he provides for our needs. Most of our lives we find ourselves in pleasant places, enjoying God’s protection and grace, his provision and nurture.

Think about what is promised when we belong to the Lord: to be shepherded, to have all our wants taken care of, to enjoy lush resources, to be comfortable, well-fed, with clear refreshing water readily available. Some people can see in the mention of quiet waters in verse 2 a foreshadowing of John’s baptism, of Jesus’ baptism, of our own baptism. Verse 3 talks about being restored – what does that indicate? We are restored because of the redemptive work of Christ on the cross and our baptism is a sign that our brokenness and separation from God are mended, our fellowship with God is renewed. This is a requisite for moving forward in life. We want to be in right fellowship with God in order to follow the path in which he desires to lead us – paths of righteousness intended for his children.

If you are familiar with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, you can see that the Psalmist begins with the very basics on the foundational level – food, water, sleep, shelter – and moves into security and safety and also includes the intimacy all people long for. After all, verse 1 says, the Lord is MY shepherd, not our shepherd, not the disciples’ shepherd, not the congregation’s shepherd, not the Church’s shepherd, but my own shepherd. Sometimes when I am saying this verse, I feel like I am the only sheep and that God is lavishing all His attention on me. While I know that is not the case, I am comforted to know that God is looking out for me. These first 3 verses of Psalm 23 paint a picture of what God designed life to be like for us. It’s natural for us to expect this to always be so.

But verse 4 moves from this season of joy and happiness and goodness to a season of disorientation and disruption. We are no longer in verdant pastures where we are comfortable. Things have changed and not for the better. We are told about this in John 16:33 (KJV). “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.” So, based on our trusting relationship with God and our faith in Who He is, even when we encounter difficult times, we continue to trust God, to set aside our fears and to take comfort in his rod that he uses to fight off enemies and keep us sheep moving in the right direction and in his staff that rescues us from harm when we have gone astray. The Psalmist recognizes that we are not mired down in the valley of shadows, unable to get out. We are accompanied through it by one who has already conquered the darkness. We don’t have to run away from distressing times,

but we walk calmly through them with God. Notice that this season of distress is only one verse long. It does not last, and we are not without help during it.

Verse 5 is where I believe we currently find ourselves in this season of transition from the valley. We are not out of the woods quite yet, but in a better place, conquering the last of the enemy, coming to the end of the battle. What is it that God gives us at this most important juncture, at this place where we now find ourselves?

First, God invites us to step aside, take a breath, and be refreshed. He has prepared a table spread with good things. We are nourished after the draining experience of walking through the valley. God provides a way station, if you will, a much-needed pit stop. At table we are not alone but in community with all who have been walking through this valley even though we may have been unaware of how many others there were in this valley. This is a foreshadowing of the Eucharist, of communion, of remembering all that God has done for us, of basking in His presence, of renewal and realignment. We recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup.

We are taught in our society that we ought to be fiercely independent and self-sufficient. That we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and conquer the impossible. But that is not God's intention. We don't have to be strong and fierce and alone. His design is for the support of community. We benefit from sharing our stories, encouraging one another, seeking God together for answers and enlightenment. We begin to see the way forward.

Next, God anoints us with oil, with the Holy Spirit, our Comforter. This is the empowerment we need to heal from our wounds in order to continue moving forward. God invites us to be plugged into His strength and ability for the work that lies ahead, to receive insight and wisdom to continue to guide our steps. Today as we stand on the threshold of moving toward God's future, of preparing to embrace what lies ahead, one of the first steps is to make sure we have addressed any lingering sorrows, pains, or anger. Ecclesiastes 3 tells us there is a season for everything including time when we need to weep and mourn, a time for healing. We must make time to come before the Lord our healer. We need time to mourn, to stand in God's presence and cry, to vent our hurt and anger, to release our pain. We cannot move forward until we are released from our valley woundings. Psalm 55:17 (KJV) says "Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice." In releasing and remembering, we prepare to move forward with God.

Then, God fills our cup to overflowing. Surely through the valley experience our resources were drained. We have nothing in our hands with which to begin the work of restoration and renewal. God graciously pours into our lives all that we will need to continue the work to which we are called. We are invited to receive of the

Lord provision, power, and presence as we head into our future. We can embrace it with God's grace. What is the ultimate future towards which we are heading? As we walk forward, we will be not back in the easy verdant pastures before the pandemic, but in a place where goodness and mercy will be following us. Picture it. As you move forward, as you walk, every time you take a step, goodness and mercy are right there following you. People around you are experiencing God's goodness and mercy. For every step we take, we leave behind a swath of goodness and mercy. No matter what we experienced in the valley, we can go forth in confidence that God is working it for our good and for the good of others. What the enemy meant for harm God will turn to his purposes.

And ultimately, we get to live in the house of the Lord forever. What a glorious future we have. Romans 8:35-39 (KJV) sums it up nicely. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?" We could add pandemics, shortages, loss. "As it is written, for thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life or angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Regardless of what may come down the pike next – other pandemics, shortages, persecutions against Christians, political challenges, economic strains – no matter what may rear its ugly head, we know that the LORD is our shepherd and we will lack nothing. It is God who cares for us, who provides for our needs, who prepares a table for us in the midst of trials, who guides us in right paths, who is constantly by our side, who anoints us with the oil of the Holy Spirit, and who brings us out with goodness and mercy into his house.

God has indeed provided ways for us to move forward. Some of them are beautifully captured in Psalm 23. We are shown the overarching picture. We can see where we are on our journey. We begin to understand that although the valleys will come, there is a plan for recovery. Just as after medical procedures, there is an expectation that the person will need time to recover, so in life we need time to recover from a valley experience. God has a terrific plan. First, he refreshes and restores us through communion and community, through feeding on the Word until we are full, no longer starving or thirsty or weak. Next he enables healing to take place through the ministry of the Holy Spirit who pours the oil of healing and comfort, of peace and relief from distress. The Holy Spirit guides us, instructs us, gives us wisdom. Then, equipped to serve once again, he fills our cups to overflowing with plenty to share with others. We become aware of the goodness and mercy following us as we focus on the ultimate future we will enjoy.

Sure, it sounds wonderful. All pie in the sky and almost too good to be true. Especially for those who have taken a hard hit. Why should we believe this in light of what we have suffered? How is it that we can know the truth of this Psalm? Why is this Psalm one of the most well-known, enduring, and loved passages in the Bible? It transcends denominations and faiths, is commonly used in the Jewish tradition and the Orthodox tradition as well as in every Christian denomination and gathering. Even people who claim no particular faith are familiar with this Psalm and often request it be read at funerals. In fact, Psalm 23 was read at my own parents' and grandparents' funerals.

Psalm 23 is a cultural icon with broad, even secular appeal. A simple search of the Library of Congress catalog brings up over 15,000 items in their collection on Psalm 23. This Psalm has been portrayed in literature, classical and popular music, film and art. There are well over 100,000 books written throughout the ages about this particular Psalm by such eminent writers as John Wesley and Dallas Willard. It has been set to music often. There are over 150 choral settings out of which I have conducted and sung at least a dozen beautiful settings of this text. I think of John Rutter's sixth movement in his *Requiem* titled *The Lord Is My Shepherd* with its soothing oboe obbligato or Schubert's setting for women's choirs. Psalm 23 was read at Whitney Houston's funeral, quoted by President George W. Bush in his speech after 9/11, read by a priest in the film *Titanic* and recited by the female protagonist Katherine Hepburn in John Wayne's *Rooster Cogburn*.

Henry Ward Beecher, a great orator and congregational minister, wrote that

Psalm 23 has charmed more griefs to rest than all the philosophy of the world. It has remanded to their dungeon more felon thoughts, more black doubts, more thieving sorrows, than there are sands on the seashore. It has comforted the noble host of the poor. It has sung courage to the army of the disappointed. It has poured balm and consolation into the heart of the sick, of captives in dungeons, of widows in their pinching griefs, of orphans in their loneliness" (Beecher, 1858, p. 8).

Christian theologian James Montgomery Boice, great believer in the inerrancy of Scripture, said

Millions of people have memorized this psalm, even those who have learned few other Scripture portions. Ministers have used it to comfort people who are going through severe personal trials, suffering illness, or dying. For some, the words of this psalm have been the last they have ever uttered in life" (as quoted in Spurgeon, 1968, p. 353).

You may have memorized Psalm 23 as a child like I did. I even created two wall hangings featuring this Psalm: one when I was twelve, and one for my mother when I was in my forties after her mother had passed away.

Is it merely the richness embedded in the text? Or does it draw us to our experiences in the past when God has been all of these things for us before, during, and after valley experiences? I think of all the valleys I have come through – car accidents, the death of my son, the mental illness of my husband, cancer – things such as might be common to all of us at some juncture. Now we add pandemic to our lists. In each valley, God was with me every step of the way. He brought me through. I take comfort in remembering God’s goodness then and know he can and will do it again. Hebrews 13:8 (KJV) tells us that Jesus Christ is “the same yesterday, and today, and forever.” I invite you to review what the Lord has already done and is currently doing for you as we look ahead. This is the comfort of God’s Word, of this Psalm, of the witness of God’s grace to the world.

God has indeed provided us with the means to draw strength from him in times of trial and trouble. I encourage you when you encounter challenges in your life to turn to Psalm 23 for strength and uplifting, for remembering whose we are, what God has done for us, what God’s intentions for us include, that this season will pass, that you will come through to a good place, that God has not forsaken you but has been with you through all of it, and that you are followed by goodness and mercy as you dwell with God. I encourage you to say this Psalm often. It bears repeating until it soaks down in our spirit and takes root.

So, what does this mean for me as a librarian? I cannot hope to serve others if I myself am still struggling with all the ways that the pandemic disrupted my life. I cannot focus on implementing changes or have enough margin to deal with new challenges on top of the residual aftereffects of the valley. Psalm 23 provides practical steps to help me recover and be fit for the ministry of service to students, faculty, and staff. I will recognize the need for communion, for a time of lament and clearing of the air, for seeking the healing of the Spirit and the wisdom to enable healthy life-supporting activities. When I am restored, my overflowing cup will bless others as they go through the same healing process. I will be able to create space for that to unfold for them also as the Lord directs.

The best way to embrace our future, to move forward in this season of post pandemic is to know the season we are in, to receive from God the table he has set before us, to accept his anointing of oil, to acknowledge the overflowing of our cup, to expect the goodness and mercy that will follow us. With these practices, we will step more fully into what God has for us both here on earth and in heaven. May God help us to move forward confidently and to fully embrace all that He has for us both here and in the hereafter. †

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