

All the Days of My Life
Psalm 23 by Patty Friesen

Psalm 23 is a Mennonite Nursing Home favourite and they can say it by memory in the King James Version so let us try. It is printed in the bulletin if we need help.

Psalm 23 is beloved through the ages because it is so personal. From King David's reflections in the sheepfield to present day, people love this psalm. I have my grandmother's bible and it is full of handwritten comments, and beside Psalm 23, she wrote this means me, Fern Roth and she replaced every first person pronoun with her own name. The Lord is Fern's shepherd, she will not want. In this light, the psalm becomes a personal and congregational testimony of God's faithfulness and care in our lives. This may be the key to this beloved psalm, that we claim it as our own. Faith itself is the door to a deep personal experience with the Good Shepherd that is at once unique and yet shared by the whole body of Christ. My goal this next year is to hear our individual faith stories and our shared faith stories here at Osler Mennonite. How has God been a shepherd to us? What have been our valleys of shadow and tables in the presence of enemies? Because I ask this of you, I will recite the psalm in the context of my own faith story.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd picture hung in the musty basement of Bluesky Mennonite Church in northern Alberta where I grew up. It was the picture of Jesus in a white robe hanging onto a branch with one hand as he reaches out with his other to a lamb that has fallen down the cliff. It reflected what I knew of Jesus from a loving home and church – that Jesus loved me and would reach down rocky cliffs to save me.

By the time I was an adolescent, this gently nurtured upbringing in the faith evolved into annual revival meetings where a school bus full of Christian hippies drove into town to evangelize us. They had such exciting lives before they got saved. I hadn't sinned quite like that but there was sure sin in there somewhere so I walked down the aisle every year just to make sure I was safely in the sheepfold. I was baptized at 15 by our interim pastor and stopped walking down the revival aisle after that.

He maketh me lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside still waters, he restoreth my soul. As a continually confessing adolescent, I needed the calming reassurance of God's shepherding love in green pastures and still waters, safe places in nature at church camp and family vacations to the Rockies.

God's presence in creation continues to restore my soul as Patrick and I go for walks along the South Saskatchewan River in Saskatoon.

He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. My small home church needed youth to teach Sunday School and by teaching younger children and directing Bible dramas, I learned to be a leader in the church. That interest in the bible and church led me go to Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg and eventually to be a youth pastor at Portland Mennonite Church in Portland, Oregon where I was ordained. God continued to lead me in right paths at seminary in Indiana and meeting and marrying Patrick and our working together at Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota for 10 years before coming to Saskatoon.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Illness and death is a part of my faith journey. My dad was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at age 50, which is how old I will be next year. Our family journey with this disease until his death at 63 is the shaping experience of my young adulthood. My work at the Mennonite Nursing Home these past 6 years has helped heal some of those memories.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies, thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over. The psalm assures me that God prepares a table before me in the presence of conflict. God is the host and protector, anointing my head with oil. I wish I would have claimed more of this promise in my ministry. It would have given me courage to deal with a conflicted relationship in our previous congregation. As painful as the experience was, God taught me a lot and allowed me to heal and continue in ministry.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me...me, Patty Friesen, all the days of my life; not just the valleys of shadow and the conflicted relationships but goodness and mercy.

This week's Canadian Mennonite article by Henry Neufeld addresses how we bear the pain of our memories. We all have some painful memories of things that happened to us. There are strained relationships with our parents and siblings; and the hurt or wrong caused us by a teacher, classmate, colleague, boss, spouse, pastor or fellow church member. Recalling and remembering brings back the pain and all the emotions that go with it. And that means the wrong continues to hurt us, even years later.

Memory is fundamental to our well-being. What do we do with our memories, especially the negative ones? Too often we hold on to old grudges and negative memories, we feed them, we thrive on them, we nurture them and we retell them. When we spend too much time going back into old horror stories, there's not much room for growth and forgiveness. It is better to move through life with a sense of providence in the midst of a wrong that befell us than making it the defining center of our lives. We can integrate the experience because maybe God has shown us some insights from it about ourselves, human nature or maybe we got closer to God through it.

Christ gives us a new identity, so that we no longer see ourselves as wronged or betrayed. Christians are not defined by what happened, but by the fact that God loves us. We are defined by how God relates to us. Remembering is important for faithful living. I'm thankful for Grandma Fern's personal interpretation of Psalm 23. I'm thankful for the biblical framework to understand my own life. I'm thankful to be here at Osler Mennonite this next year to hear how God has been and is your Good Shepherd. Let us pray...