



“Not Just for Funerals”  
Psalm 23  
April 26, 2026

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What we have memorized says something about us. I will never forget the theme songs to television shows I watched in my youth.

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood  
A beautiful day for a neighbor  
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?

Sunny day  
Sweepin' the clouds away  
On my way to where the air is sweet  
Can you tell me how to get... how to get to Sesame Street?

And for people of a certain age, who can forget this one?

Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale,  
A tale of a fateful trip  
That started from this tropic port  
Aboard this tiny ship

I didn't even like Gilligan's Island. But I will never get that song out of my head. I have other things bouncing around in my memory. Lyrics to Broadway shows. I know all the words to *Moon River* and *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Snippets of Shakespeare and Chaucer I had to memorize in high school.

And the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. I never set out to memorize it. But it's in there. Mostly because of funerals. It's widely read at funerals. Why? Because it is comforting. And beautiful. But it's not just for funerals. There is so much in it that is worthy of our time and attention. It is only nine sentences long but contains multiple memorable phrases and images. For today, I'm going to focus on the phrases and images that help us walk and help us rest.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death

That is helpful language for that final walk we will all take one day that leads us from this world into the life to come and it also helps us with anytime we find ourselves walking through challenging territory. We can make it through. How?

According to the psalm...

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

What exactly are a rod and staff? These are the tools of a shepherd. The rod is used more to protect the sheep – to push away unwanted intruders like foxes or wolves. The staff is used more to guide the sheep to prevent one from wandering too far away. And the staff in particular helps the shepherd navigate challenging terrain.

There is a modern-day equivalent of a staff. Hiking poles. I love hiking poles. I don't remember when I first started using them, but it's been a while now. I use them whenever I hike. They give me confidence. They provide stability. They help distribute the load off my knees, especially going downhill. They help me hike through scree, mud, boulder fields. Hiking poles help me navigate terrain I couldn't otherwise manage.

I have multiple pairs. One in my car at all times because you never know when you are going to encounter challenging terrain. One of my pairs of hiking poles belonged to my dad. Every time I use them, I remember him and what it means to walk through this world with integrity and kindness.

And I have a lightweight set that are easy to take with me in a small bag or backpack because once again you never know when the terrain is going to get rough.

I'm no longer talking about hiking. One of the many reasons the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm has such traction in our lives is because it acknowledges the roughness of the terrain. Even when the way goes through the most desolate of places, God will be with us.

I remember the day I had emergency surgery to have my appendix removed. I was 21 years old. I remember lying on a gurney in a hospital hallway waiting for the effects of the anesthesia to take hold. I was scared. I was frightened. The only thing I could think to do was to say the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. At the time, I didn't have all of the words memorized but I sure knew the first two lines.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

I said it over and over again. And my heart rate slowed down. A sense of calm returned. I felt supported and connected to God. As the anesthesia took hold, I experienced a profound sense of peace.

Ever since then this psalm is what I turn to when my back is against the wall, when I feel small and afraid, when I encounter challenging terrain. It's so much more helpful than the theme to Gilligan's Island. The psalm itself serves as hiking poles for me, something I turn to for balance and support, stability and strength.

At the beginning I said that the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm helps us walk and helps us rest. Now, I'm going to focus on rest.

Restoration is a big theme in the Bible. In the Bible, nations are restored. Parents and children are restored to one another. There's a lot of restoring in the Bible. The most famous use of the word is found in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

The Lord restoreth my soul.

Oh, I like the sound of that. It makes me think of art restorers, those highly trained professionals who use ultraviolet light and magnifying glasses to distinguish paint from varnish and dirt. Then they use carefully chosen solvents to try to uncover the true colors of the painting.

I want God to restore me, to gently clean away all of the dirt and varnish and disappointment and regret that have accumulated over the years in order to reveal the person God created me to be. I'm talking about the self that is inside each one of us that existed before the world told us who we are and what we should want and who we should be.

According to the Bible, God is in the business of restoration, of revival, of reminding us of our true full selves. This is **God's** work. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, all the action verbs belong to the Lord.

[The Lord] leads me beside the still waters.

[The Lord] restores my soul:

[The Lord] makes me lie down...

That's an interesting phrase. God makes me lie down. I have this image that I can't get out of my head. I am tired and lying down to take a rest but there are things that need to be done. I have a to-do list a mile long and the things that are on that list aren't going to magically get done while I lay there daydreaming. I start to get up but I am pushed back down by a gentle but powerful hand. God makes me lie down.

O.K. God doesn't actually force us to rest. God doesn't compel us to use our PTO. God encourages us. God invites us to sink into God's care; to release ourselves and those we love into God's capable hands. But it's still our choice. It's still up to us.

I've always operated as though there are two big categories of tired. One is what I call good tired. It's the tired you feel after activity and connection and good work. The tired after a day spent hiking or gardening. For me it's the Easter Sunday, I preached two times and shook about two hundred hands afternoon nap. That is good tired.

And then there is what I call ambiguous tired. Weariness that may be due to loneliness or grief or illness or because navigating life is just so hard these days or we just may have no idea of why we are so tired – we feel disconnected, unmoored, lethargic, weary. So, we haven't accomplished much. And too often in such circumstances, I know that I think to myself: what right do I have to be tired?

When it comes to restoration, God doesn't distinguish between good tired and ambiguous tired. It is a mistaken idea that we have to earn our rest, that we have to check off a certain number of things on our self-imposed checklist to be eligible to take a break. That's not how God works. Rest is a good gift from God, available to us at any and all times.

It's a gift in and of itself. And the psalm knows without rest we do not have the energy to walk through whatever valley we find ourselves in.

Today, this week, accept the gift. These lengthening spring days are a great time to practice saying "yes" to God's invitation to restore our souls.

Rest, deeply and well. When you feel ready, grab your hiking poles and head out into God's world.

It may be helpful to hum a little tune:

(sung to the tune of Gilligan's Island)

The Lord's my Shepherd.

I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie...

in pastures green, he leadeth me...

It's catchy, isn't it?