

March 19, 2023
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14

In the Presence of my Enemies

It's tough to have enemies. And at some point, we all have one or two.

Maybe it's a school enemy. Or a business enemy or a rival team enemy.

Maybe our enemy is the insurance company that won't pay our claim.

Or the person who double parks their massive pick-up truck. The office

yogurt thief. The Facebook frenemy. That cat who pushes your coffee

cup off the table, just for fun. It can feel like our enemies are

surrounding us. But let's all take a deep breath. And remember that even

in the presence of our enemies, God is with us.

The 23rd Psalm reminds us that we aren't alone when enemies appear.

The Lord is our shepherd. And the Lord provides for us, even when the

world is out to get us. David, the king of Israel, is said to have written

this Psalm. David was once a shepherd himself imagines God looking

after us like a shepherd looking after their flock. God is a good shepherd,

who guides the sheep and protects them and makes sure they have

everything they need. Green pastures, still waters, safe paths to walk on,

protection from wolves and thieves. The Lord is my shepherd, David says. And I don't need a thing. He restores my soul.

The word for soul is nephesh in Hebrew. Nephesh means your inner being. It is the living essence within you animated by the breath, the breath that comes from God. The breath of life that God breathed into us in the beginning; the ruach. It kindled the spirit within us, the soul. And the Lord cares for that soul. God 'restores' the soul when it needs it.

When our soul is empty, God fills it. When it wanders away, God brings it back. The Lord restores us to life. The Hebrew word for restore is 'shuv'. It means to return something to its original place; to bring it back. The Lord brings us back to green pastures. The Lord brings us back to still waters. The Lord brings us back to ourselves. Back to our humanity. Back to the wondrous, amazing creations that we are. We aren't robots or mindless consumers. We are living children of a living God.

And the Lord is our shepherd. The Lord wants us to be safe and healthy. The Lord wants to bring us back to ourselves when we wander away.

When we have been misguided and misdirected by the world. When we

have lost our way and our sense of worth. We are so easily frightened. So easily confused. When we feel scared, our emotions take over. All of our thoughts go from our thinking brain in the cerebrum to our reptile brain in the amygdala. That's where our survival center is. When we operate in a panic, we lose our ability to reason and think. We lose our center and our focus. We ignore our inner self, our nephesh, our soul, because we are overwhelmed by the feeling of danger.

Psalm 23 is about being in danger. David wrote it when he was being chased by his enemy, King Saul. Saul was angry and jealous because everyone loved David. David was the one who had defeated Goliath.

David was the one who had driven out the Philistines. David was the one who was the hero. Not Saul. He hated that David seemed to be God's anointed. He hated that David seemed to rule his kingdom. David was King Saul's enemy. So he sent his soldiers to kill him.

David went on the run. He hid wherever he could. He and a few loyal friends went from canyon to cave in the wilderness. They survived on whatever food and water they could find. Always moving, always on the lookout for Saul. They walked through the shadowed valleys waiting for

an ambush. Fearing for their lives. But even so, David kept his hope in God. He kept faith that wasn't alone, even with enemies around him.

“Just keeping going. Just keep breathing. God will protect me with the rod and staff of a shepherd. God will watch over me and keep me safe.

I'm not alone. God is with me.”

In the dark, shadowy valleys, David was afraid. Maybe you know what it's like to be afraid. Maybe you know what it's like to have enemies pursuing you, tracking you, hunting you down. Maybe you feel under attack, like everyone and everything has turned on you. And there is no one to trust. You are in trouble. You are anxious and afraid. And where is God? Where is your shepherd? Where are the green pastures and still waters? There are only opponents. Adversaries. Enemies. And they are all after you.

My dad is a retired Presbyterian minister. He served churches in KS, SD, and IA. One of the churches turned on him. The church had a history of fighting amongst themselves. There was trauma and hurt there. But it's always easier to make someone else responsible for it. So some church members went around and stirred up resentment against my dad. They

collected signatures of people who wanted him to leave. Most were people who didn't know my dad and hardly ever came to church. He was their enemy. And they wanted to get rid of him. If they got rid of him, their problems would be solved. I felt sad for my dad, and angry at those people who were supposed to be Christian. But when people are threatened and see you as the enemy, there is nothing you can do.

In the church, we face enemies. Often those enemies are within us. It's us ourselves and our own issues. Our own fear and denial and lack of faith in God's love. Our need to protect our kingdom. But there are also enemies outside us too. Those who don't like what we say or who we welcome. They feel threatened by who we love and who we bless.

Because we challenge the idea that we don't live to consume or be in control. Because human lives matter, the lives of every gender, race, and ability matter. And that might make us some enemies. But Psalm 23 tells us to fear no evil because God is with us. In the dark valleys, the scary meetings, and tense conversations. God is protecting your life. Just keep breathing. Just keep existing and being. The enemy can't stop us. The

light will shine in the darkness. Remember yourself. Find your center.

God will restore your soul.

In the presence of our enemies, God takes care of us. It says he prepares a table for us. The Lord sets out refreshment. A party of joy and laughter and good times right in the midst of our bad times. There's the fancy tablecloth, the fine china, the silverware and the fancy glasses, the dessert fork, the bread plate, the soup spoon. A feast, right in front of those who hate us. God doesn't wait. God sets it all out where they can see. They haven't gotten to us. They haven't overcome. We're still here. God is providing for us. In the midst of your challenges, look for the table. Look for the feast. Look for the way God reminds you that God is still with you. The invitation to coffee. That meal dropped on your porch. The cookies and juice shared after church. The potluck meal where you get to know others. Yes, the enemies will still be there, but you aren't alone. God has set a table for you.

But even more than that, God anoints us with oil. In front of our enemies, God blesses us and says: "This one is mine. This one has my Spirit in them, no matter what anyone else says. They good and holy;

and they don't deserve to be cursed or attacked or gotten rid of." Our enemies attack us, we might believe that we deserve it. We might think we have done something wrong. We brought it on ourselves. If only we had kept quiet. If only we had minded our manners and not disturbed the peace. If only we had hidden who we were from everyone and been less than ourselves. But God says no to that. God anoints us. Right in front of those who are against us. God pours out love and grace on us and makes us more instead of less. God restores us to our full selves, the person God made us to be. In the dark valleys, just keep breathing. Keep existing and being you. God has anointed that person you are and made you a part of the kingdom of God where there is good news to the poor, and sight to the blind, and release to the captive. Where goodness stands strong in the midst of evil.

In the presence of our enemies, the Lord anoints our heads with oil and sets a table before us. And the Lord fills our cups to overflowing. It takes a lot out of us to stand against an enemy. It is draining. We are always thinking about what to say or do next. The effort can take over our life and consume our soul, our *nephesh*, our whole inner being. And so the

Lord fills us. Not with anger and resentment. Not with bitterness and revenge. Not with shoulda, coulda, woulda. But with mercy, grace and love. With peace and hope and possibility. The Lord has given us so much to be thankful for. So when face those trials, count your blessings. Keep breathing, keep living and keep remembering who you are and what you have. Your life is full. Your heart is full. The earth is full of wonderful creations. The dirt, the air, the growing things. Raindrops, ice cream, your comfy bed, your warm house, your friends and family. Count all the good thing you have. Find someone to help you remember yourself: a mentor, a counselor, a therapist. The Lord wants you to have a full cup. So you can dwell in the house of the Lord. Even in the dark valley, in the scary times, when enemies crowd around, our soul will be restored. It will be returned. It will be brought back to us. In the darkest places, the light will still shine.

For our breathing meditation today, I want you to sit comfortably. Close your eyes. Slowly bring your attention to your breathing. Notice your breath moving in and out of your lungs. A seamless movement. Constant and reliable. The breath inside our lungs and outside of our lungs. Think

of this breath as the presence of God. Constant and faithful. Full of grace and love. It is a blessing that you are breathing. It is a blessing just to be alive. To be here. In spite of everything going on around us. Everything going on in the world. In spite of challenges. Heartache. Loss. Troubles caused by enemies and adversaries. We notice them. And how small they are. How utterly miniscule they are in the presence of God. We breathe in and out. And every breath, God brings us back to ourselves. God restores our souls. We find our center, our safe place where God is for us. And with us. And we stay in that breath. And we come back to that breath, in that safe place, in that love and light that no enemy can disturb. And no darkness can overcome.