

“The Lord is my shepherd. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Sitting in the family room last week at my parents’ house talking with two of my sisters, a nephew and my dad the phone rang. “Hello?” Softer than usual and branded with a slight metallic tinge of distress the voice of my grandma haltingly came across the line, “Hi honey, is your mom there?” “She’s resting grandma. Is everything OK?” “Well, the physical therapist was just in here and I asked her to read this letter for me that I got in the mail. I have a hard time reading because of my eyesight, you know? It’s from the State of Michigan I think, but I don’t know what it says, so I was wondering if Mary could tell me. My eyes are so bad I can’t read anymore so the physical therapist read it for me. I meant to put the mail on the dresser so your mom could pick it up when she was last here, but I forgot. My memory is getting bad too. I’m just worried because I don’t know what it says; I can’t read it.” As her fever of words increased, so did the tangible fear and confusion. Then, after a few minutes, with a quivering, tightened voice, my grandma cried, “I’m scared!” The crack in the dam had finally burst and a torrent of tears erupted upon her face.

As badly as I wanted to pull this fellow flock member out of that abyss, I could not, for I too am only a lamb. And so as our unease rose, the ancient words of the beloved 23rd psalm were prayed aloud. “*The Lord* is my shepherd.” Not my parents. Not me. *The Lord*. The one who traveled through the shadowy depths of the dead, unearthing new life for her, and all the world.

Afterwards I learned that my mom was already aware of the letter and had informed my grandma of the content. Her memory, however, had, sadly, failed to pull up that data. Getting mail from the government often sets a person’s nerves on edge. Mix in an inability to see clearly enough to know what the correspondence stated and declining mental processes, and you have a

recipe for substantial angst. Infested with voracious terror, any and all traces of lush grass and calm waters were eclipsed in the landscape of her reality in that moment. Frantically fleeing the snapping jaws of anxiety, there appeared a familiar staff, fending off the predator and gently herding her back into the fold. Even there, in that pitch-black valley of dementia, the Faithful Shepherd drew ever near.

“The Lord is my shepherd.” Unlike the psalmist, these were not words I confidently shouted aloud, or even hesitatingly repeated to myself as a soothing mantra, while metaphorically standing at a crossroads one night twelve years ago. Having spent the previous seven days dressed in distress and wearing the makeup of daily tears, I had sought the counsel of the pastor. See, the atmosphere of my job at the time was becoming unbearably toxic. Between the ever-evolving duties of managing the hotel’s front desk and employees and the ill treatment by the owners, I was slowly corroding inside. However, I had financial responsibilities and it *was* a source of income. Living on my own for the first time and having purchased a vehicle just one year prior, in addition to the accumulated student loans, I couldn’t exactly up and leave. Those bills would continue to come every month like clockwork whether I had a job or not. Advised to not only quit as soon as possible, but to also contemplate a long-range vision for my life, I left my pastor’s office conflicted. It would be prudent to secure other work before giving my two-week notice. But, how long could I endure things at the hotel while searching for other employment?

Round and round it played in my head, spinning faster and faster like a careening carousel. I wanted to be on stable ground again, to be off the dizzying ride, but it wasn’t slowing down. The tighter I clung to the fiberglass figurines, the more unsteady it became. As it started to teeter off the tracks, I was confronted with this question: will I remain on this downward

spiraling mental amusement ride, or will I make the jump? Will I continue to rely on myself, or will I trust in God?

I confess: I did not have full confidence in the Lord. In that pitch-black valley of panic, my wool got stuck in the thicket of self-sufficiency. “*The Lord* is my Shepherd.” Not me. The Lord is the one who provides security as well as nourishment—spiritual and physical. Not me. The Lord is the one who untangled me from the snares of death on the cross and in the grave. Not me. As a relentlessly insistent voice reminded me of this truth, so eloquently declared in the psalm, I finally submitted my fate to the staff and rod of the Faithful Shepherd.

As the Spirit comforts and/or confronts each of us through these poetic words of scripture, I invite all of us to reflect on both of these questions: When has the Shepherd reassured me? And, what do I need to surrender to the Shepherd? I then encourage you to write your answers down on the scrap paper provided and take them home, maybe hang them on the fridge or put them on your nightstand.

And as we meditate, let us pray: Dear Shepherd, may your deep and genuine compassion restore our entire being. And as you prepare this holy table before us, may it strengthen us to live in trustful reception and provision of your gifts. Amen.