

# Sermons from Parma Greece United Church of Christ

## **STILL WATERS**

Easter-4

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Psalm 23

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### **The Divine Shepherd**

*A Psalm of David.*

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.*

### **Psalm 23**

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It has been said this portion of scripture is the favorite of Christians in Americans.

Though it is used only a few times for Sunday worship in the lectionary, I and many pastors frequently read it to hospital patients, to the dying, and at memorial services.

Did you ever wonder why? I have.

I suspect the popular perception of American culture is that we are a busy, productive, and even hurried people. We always pushing ourselves. We're active and on the go.

We're plugged into our iPods and MP3 players so the music is always playing, serving to drive us.

Even on solitary walks in the woods we listen to the sounds of others playing in our ears.

How often have you felt like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*: “I’m late, I’m late, for a very important date.” Haste shapes our lives of many. If we are busy, active people, quickly going from here to there, if we are people who don’t really like silence, then how do we explain the popularity of words out of the Bible that paint a picture of tranquility and peace?

Let me draw out the mood of these words.

“*The Lord is my shepherd.*”

I am content to simply be. I need nothing. I am at peace.

“*He makes me lie down in green pastures.*”

I am secure and cared for. Life is beautiful. The hills are green and I am free to lie here looking into the sky with nothing else to do.

“*He leads me beside still waters.*”

Utter peace and tranquility reign. There is a calm over everything outside, and I can soak all that up inside of me. Stillness and quiet are the gifts God brings.

I trust that the image of those still waters can convey to you today the “peace, which passes all understanding” the peace brought only by Christ. For quiet in and of itself is only quiet, but if the quiet that your soul needs is the stripping away of all extraneous noise so that you can hear the still small voice of God speaking grace to you, then quiet is a redemptive gift. Still waters is the image for solitude, an aloneness that is full, rich, and satisfying because it is an aloneness that allows for awareness of God.

I remember those times when I was in my teens that I would be in bed at my Aunt’s cottage on Canandaigua Lake and go to sleep listening to the waves roll in. I often wonder if that is why I always had thoughts of living on the water. Henry David

Thoreau wrote: “I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.” He had found his still waters.

What is it about the woods, wilderness, and water? One must escape the routine, the crowds, and chaos to be able to listen to the steady cadence of waves lapping the shore. Water rhythmically meeting rock and sand has a soothing, almost healing effect on many. Still waters invite reflection. The Shepherd leads me beside the still waters, and that’s how the Shepherd revives my soul. New life is mine because the Shepherd has taken me where I need to be. The Shepherd is reviving me, guiding me on the pathways, and I am even able to walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

We’re afraid of that journey, but in the Shepherd’s presence our courage is heightened.

Christians have often built upon the sheep/Shepherd metaphor. “All we like sheep have gone astray”.

We have been so filled with ourselves, and that keeps us scurrying to and fro seeking peace. Busyness and hurry have taken control of our lives. Noise and confusion have kept us agitated. We don’t know which way to go with our lives. Then the Good Shepherd, Jesus, the risen Christ, calls our name, speaking tenderly to tell us we are loved and forgiven.

The Shepherd moves before us, bidding us to follow. Contentment is ours as we walk beside the waters in a blissful solitude because the Shepherd is leading. Jesus, Lord and Savior, Prince of Peace, Son of God there is need for nothing and no one else.

All we hear is, "Hush be still lie down." Christ touches us with divine forgiveness and healing, and in this encounter our very soul comes alive. Taking us to the stillness, the Good Shepherd has introduced us to new life.

In your travels, have you driven through mountains, and seen the signs alerting drivers to the runaway truck ramp? One mile ahead, one-half mile ahead, one-quarter mile, then the ramp. It's a dirt track leading off the highway, and it's graded steeply upward so a runaway rig with no brakes can go barreling onto it and be slowed by the incline to a gradual stop. It's smart highway planning.

Maybe our worship is directed toward the many times our brakes have failed and we are on a runaway path. Maybe that's the purpose of the 23rd Psalm. Maybe a few minutes of hearing the Shepherd's voice in scripture and prayer will bring us to a stop and introduce us to the stillness. The Good Shepherd eagerly waits for the opportunity to take our hand and guide us safely out of the fast lane.

We are fortunate to be taken onto the safety ramp so our out-of-control life can be stopped. There, beside the still waters, Christ speaks words of life to our soul. It's one thing to visit the still waters, but it's another thing to live there. I suspect not many of us will escape to a nearby monastery or convent to live. That is a calling for only a few, and the rest of us will continue to live as we do. But I'm aware of the shaping power of the Word we hear in this assembly each Sunday, the forming power of God's gracious forgiveness announced to us when we are together, and the encouraging power experienced in our community as we seek to see Christ in each other and offer one another the sign of peace. I also know that the Risen Christ seeks to dwell richly in our hearts and is not limited to those who live full time in a retreat setting. Maybe this is as good as it gets. Maybe the stillness we seek is right here, right now in this time of worship, and throughout the week we can recall it and be stilled where we live and work.

Let the sheep remind you of the still waters. May they point you to the Good Shepherd, the risen Christ, who draws you to his presence. May you have the good sense, in his presence, to perk up your ears to listen carefully to hear your name gently called in love. God's peace to you. Amen.