

"Journey's End"

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¹*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

²*He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;*

³*he restores my soul.*

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴*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.*

⁵*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

⁶*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)

In his extensive study of the book of Psalms, Old Testament Professor William Brown of Columbia Seminary claims that, of all the metaphors in the psalter, two of them seem to rise above all of the others, both in frequency of use and theological importance. They are the image of "refuge" and the image of "pathway."

Specifically, Brown argues that these two metaphors, refuge and pathway, combine to give the entire psalter its theological shape. While each image is powerful in its own right, neither would be complete without the other. And when they come together in ancient Hebrew poetry, these two metaphors can paint a powerful picture of human experience and faith.

Given the centrality of these images in the overall canon of the psalter, it should not surprise us that they converge prominently in the most beloved psalm of them all. In the 23rd Psalm, the ying and yang of pathway and refuge -- the give and take of a life of discipleship marked both by "going out" and by "coming in" -- is found in every one of its familiar lines.

The images of refuge cannot be missed. With the Lord as our shepherd, we lie down in green pastures beside still waters. In these places, our souls are restored. In these places, we are safe and comfortable, protected by the rod and staff of God. Tables are set before us and our cups overflow, and even though our enemies are there, we need not fear. In these places, we are anointed as God's own, for we have come home to dwell in the house of the Lord. This psalm touches our hearts deeply because it speaks of the kind of refuge that we all need in the deepest parts of our being.

At the same time, another aspect of experience keeps peeking out in and around these images of safety and peace. This contrasting part of the narrative reminds us that faith must also be experienced out on the road. God did not create us to sit perpetually still in one place, so occasionally we must stretch our legs along the pathways of the world God has created. This is the implied but obvious vocation of one who follows a shepherd. His role is to lead us to the green pastures and still waters, to help us find the trailheads to paths of righteousness. Those places will not come to us; we must go to them. When we leave places of refuge to follow, we are likely to encounter unpleasant realities. We may even find ourselves in the presence of enemies. There is peril and vulnerability out there on the path, but there is also adventure, exploration and



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opportunities for love and service. To be an apostle is to be sent out in Christ's name, following as best we can the One who has told us that he is "the Way."

In 1976, as a second grader in Greensboro, I learned one of my first lessons about what it means to be out on the path. My parents were building a new house for our family, but the sale of our current home had to close before our new one was ready. We spent the interim, which was just about a week, in a lovely establishment on Battleground Avenue known as the Journey's End Motel. It was a motel in the true sense of the word -- a motor lodge right out of the 1950's with no interior hallways. All of the rooms opened out onto the parking lot. You may have some rough images in your mind, but from my perspective, the Journey's End was a fantastic adventure. The thing that sealed the deal for me was that the TV in our room got about 20 channels. It seems quaint now, 20 channels, but to a second grader in the 1970's, it was an embarrassment of riches.

Even so, things didn't get really interesting until the day we were supposed to leave the Journey's End Motel. Our new house was ready, and after school I would be taking my new bus to the new house for the very first time. When the bus arrived at my stop, about half a block from the house, I walked up to the house, found the back door unlocked, and went into our new, fresh, yellow kitchen. No one was there. I called into the house, but got no answer. I looked around the yard. No one there either. The plan had clearly been for mom to be there when I got home.

It was a puzzle, so I immediately put my 8-year old brain to work. According to what seemed to me to be unassailable kid logic, I concluded that my mom must be back at the motel packing up the last of our stuff. And, if that was the case, the only logical response for me would be to go there and meet her. So, I started walking. Turning right out of our driveway, I walked about ten blocks to the end of our street. Taking another right down Cone Boulevard, I then walked to Battleground Avenue, one of the busiest commercial streets in Greensboro. At that point, the sidewalks ended (because no one in his right mind would be walking there). To stay out of the five lanes of traffic to my right, I hopped bushes and traversed parking lots. All told, it was a walk of about 3 miles.

And I have no idea how long that walk took, because I was having the time of my life. I knew my parents would be so proud of me, having solved the mystery and taken care of this problem myself. And the adventure of it all was intoxicating. I remember that on the way I found a bicycle flag -- you remember those orange, triangular flags that you could put on bicycles? I had always wanted one. This one actually didn't have a flag on it... it had been ripped off... and one end was broken... but I didn't care. It was still awesome, and I was certainly not going to just leave such a great prize on the ground. So for the rest of the way, I was like Moses, walking with my big, orange, flexible staff, parting traffic at major intersections. The sun was shining, it was a beautiful day, and I was discovering the world.

Of course, when I got to the Journey's End Motel, I found that the door to our room was locked. When I knocked, there was no answer. Lesser minds may have interpreted this as a challenge to the whole "mom-at-the-hotel" hypothesis, but I was able to see that she had just left to take another load over to the new house. Surely, she would be back soon. Best to wait here at this point. So I walked over to the motel office and pulled the heavy door open. I couldn't see over the counter, but I could see the little bell there. I reached up and gave it a ring. After a while, an employee came out and peered down over the counter, wondering what in the world I could possibly want. What I wanted, and what I asked for, was a key to room 104.

And he gave it to me! I guess he figured that I must know what I was doing, because any other explanation would have been too absurd. He never even checked to see if room 104 was vacant or not. He reached over to the wall of keys, pulled #104 off the nail, and handed it to me.

After school cartoons were in full swing, and I had unilateral access to a fully loaded cable TV, so “Felix the Cat” and I settled in to wait for my parents to arrive. My grand and glorious adventure kept getting grander and more glorious. I was making my way along a new path, enjoying all of these new experiences, tasting freedom in ways I never had before.

Now, there are enough parents in this room to know that what I have shared with you so far is only one side of this story. While I was out on the sunny path of adventure, my parents were walking a very dark valley, praying frantically for some refuge that they feared they may never find. They didn't even know if I had gotten on the right bus at school. Even if I did, no one had seen me in the neighborhood. All they knew for sure was that they had no idea where I was.

As it turned out, my mom had been a few doors down meeting one of our new neighbors when I came into the kitchen. The bus had just come earlier than they thought it would. So, while I was hopping bushes along the edge of Battleground Avenue, my mom was phoning in a missing child alert.

While I was asking for the key to room 104, a family friend was trying to track down my school bus driver.

While I was watching cartoons in the motel room, my mom was sitting in a police cruiser, listening as officers on the radio described the little red jacket I had worn to school that morning.

As a parent now myself, it is hard for me to imagine that kind of fear and trembling. In those moments, they desperately needed a shepherd who could find them in the darkness, who could lead them back to the comfort and safety of green pastures and still waters. They needed a refuge.

In the middle of my third episode of Felix the Cat, the green rotary phone in the motel room rang. When I answered it, there was a stunned silence on the other end of the line. Then a woman's voice asked incredulously “Peter? Is that you?” When I said yes, her instructions were quick and urgent: “Stay right there!” The phone on the other end slammed down.

About a minute later, I heard sirens outside. As I opened the door, several police cars squealed into the parking lot with lights flashing and sirens blaring. This was, I thought, the absolutely coolest day in the history of days! And then I recognized my dad's car. Somehow the inkling had come to him that, as crazy as it might sound, I might have walked all the way back to the Journey's End Motel.

I wanted to share this story with you today, not only because I believe it illustrates the ways that the poetic metaphors of pathway and refuge are inextricably linked in our lives of faith, but also because I believe it contains an important lesson for the church. One observation that has been made about churches in general is that they tend to gravitate toward one of two poles. Some churches lean heavily toward an emphasis on gathering in. These churches focus predominantly on individual souls. Their prime target is the world-weary Prodigal, the one who is carrying heavy burdens, one who needs rest for the spirit and salvation for the soul. These churches promote a sense of comfort -- of Refuge -- for the sinner or beleaguered soul who needs to be welcomed home.

Other churches are only at home when they are out on the Path. These churches embrace Christ's call to go out and feed the hungry, care for the sick and liberate the oppressed. They are energized by issues of social justice.

There is nothing wrong with either one of these portraits of ministry, unless our focus on one side of the coin means that we forsake the other. And that tends to happen. Refuge churches can get so focused on comforting the afflicted that they forget to get out in service to others, and Pathway churches can become so enmeshed in the work of mission and justice that they neglect the need for reassurance and spiritual rest. Psalm 23 reminds us that all of us need places of safety, shelter from the storms of life. But the psalm also assumes that we will go out... that we will follow

the shepherd... that from time to time we will have to traverse some difficult valleys if we want to find the paths of righteousness.

So, William Brown is exactly right, that each metaphor needs the other... and so do we. Every person -- and every church -- needs both. The Pathway of discipleship is desolate and dangerous without places of Refuge, and the Refuge can become impotent and self-serving without the challenges and lessons of the Path.

Those of us who are parents want to keep our children safe. It is the natural inclination of love -- our instinct to protect our precious ones from harm. At the same time, all of our hard work of training our children, teaching them right from wrong and preparing them for life in the world, does not assume that they will just stay at home and never leave the house. We raise them in certain ways because we want them to go out and experience life to the fullest. We want our child to love other people, even if it means her heart might get broken. We want our child to go out to preserve and defend the truth, even if that work might expose her to insults or injury. We want her to love and serve as Jesus did, even if it might take her to dangerous places. God, of course, wants the same for us. Because we are his children, God wants to keep us safe. But because we are his disciples, God knows there are paths that we must walk in his name. Psalm 23 lies at the heart of our understanding of what it means to be a "real Christian" because it stands squarely at the intersection of Path and Refuge.

When the word came across the police radio that the little boy in the red jacket had been found, that he was safe and healthy, there was a moment of joy in the cruiser where my mom was sitting. After that moment, the officer driving the car turned and looked at her with a face that bore both relief and pain. "I guess I can tell you now about the way this story usually ends," he said. "I've never known one of these to have a happy ending... until today."

The great blessing of life with the Good Shepherd is that, even when we are on the Path, Refuge is never far from us. On every Path of discovery, through the depth of every dark valley, Refuge walks with us, urging us forward on the Way that will take us home, to the time when we will "dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

And so may we -- as Christians, as disciples, and as the church -- at home and on the paths of life -- proclaim together with joy that "the Lord is my shepherd" until our Journey's End.

Amen.