

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

What a pleasant evening for a walk. Even though it was December, the air still held warmth from the daytime Florida sun. Leaving my parent's home and thinking I knew the street names close by, I was confident that the stroll would be accomplished without "directional problem". The days spent with a houseful of siblings and spouses who had come to share the last days of my mom's life that Christmas week were somewhat trying and emotional, particularly for this first trimester pregnant woman. A walk would do me good. The still much undeveloped gated community provided what I thought would be a safe space to shed some tears and restore my soul. As the sun took rest in the western sky and the temperature receded, I began to be concerned. What happened to the street names and the houses that were familiar? Streets had become avenues, ways, and boulevards...homes were fewer in number in the "outback" and I was sure some of the night creatures were about, exploring humans' encroachment upon their homes and living space. Foolishly, I wondered just how far alligators might travel to find waterways in the newly developing area. There were few lights for guidance and my steps along the path didn't seem to be leading me in the direction of home. After a bit, I saw a house with the porch light shining and decided that knocking on the door was the best, the only choice I had if I didn't want to have a solo sleepover in this "dark valley". 40 years later, I don't remember the name of the man who answered my fearful knock...I do remember his welcome, his assurance that he knew my mom and dad and where it is they lived; turns out he managed the small shop at the entrance to the community and was familiar with the folks that made this place their home. As I got into his car, I wasn't fearful, only thankful and relieved. The goodness and mercy of this man isn't forgotten and the thankfulness for a safe return is remembered.

The Lord IS my shepherd. Present tense. This psalm, familiar to most, is one of comfort. And how much more so if one sees the word IS and can make the immediate connection to the presence of the shepherd, here, right now.

I don't know about you, but dark valleys and shadows of death seem pretty evident these days. In our own lives perhaps we're grieving the loss of a loved one, a job or a relationship. The daily news offers story after story that keeps us off balance and provides little light at the end of the tunnel for restoration of much.

The signs are painfully clear right now that our precious world, this fragile Earth, our island home as the prayer calls it, and all that inhabit it, human and otherwise, are struggling. Riptides of false promises pull one into dangerous waters; torrents of racism, bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, greed, and war threaten to wash away any solid footing we try to establish. Real or imagined divisions and lack of conversation and mutual respect stir and muddy the water making it hard to see the face of Jesus in the other. Much of what we hold dear can easily be washed away in a flashflood of uncertainty. Tranquil, still water seems hard to find.

The path of righteousness likely will take us through dark valleys and suffering. These are a part of life; we're not promised a life free from suffering and difficulty. One of my favorite scripture passages is Micha 6:8, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" In this verse I find a path of righteousness. We will sometimes, as human beings do, stray, become lost, lose sight, and when we do, we are blessed and graced by the Good Shepherd's leading. Living into our Baptismal promises, to be co-creators of the Kingdom in the here and now, helps fulfill the "requirements" of the Micah passage. Through prayer, meditation, gathering, Communion, shared life and ministry, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can support and empower one another.

We Jesus Followers, people of The Way, are called to good places. God will provide green pastures of Sabbath and still waters to restore and replenish. The table is already set for us. The light shines...come, dwell, now and forever more.

Amen.