

## **Raw Edge**

Psalm 23

Acts 9: 36-43

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### *Psalm 23*

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.

### *Acts 9:36-43*

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

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The certified nursing assistant, the CNA, gently bathes the anxious and confused elderly woman. In tender, soothing words she reminds her that she used to bathe her own children just like this.

The cleaning company team hurries into the emergency room cubicle to prepare it for the next person who is waiting to be treated for their illness, their injury, and rest assured that they will be cared for in a place that is clean and safe.

The paraeducators spend their days guiding, encouraging, directing and reassuring children who have a hard time in school, who struggle to learn, so that these years that shape their foundational education will be the best they can be for all of their life ahead.

A CNA, a cleaner, a paraeducator, all tend to the most vulnerable among us, to any of us when we are in need, at risk and weak. We are dependent on their humble jobs for our most basic needs. They shepherd those in their care, tending to those who are in the greatest need in this moment, they are bound in a relationship. Recognizing that vulnerability is a call for greater affection and attention, the CNA, the cleaner, the paraeducator, responds with care and patience,

not frustration or annoyance. They soothe the raw edges of doubt, uncertainty, and concern. Each have and honor the tasks of providing and protecting, of guidance and restoration.

Chances are none of us have ever met an actual shepherd—or ever will—but we certainly know about this ancient work and what is to be under the watchful eye and support of a shepherd. The CNA, the cleaner, the paraeducator, are all acting as shepherds as they tend to the vulnerable needs of those in their care, as they guide and direct them in the right direction.

David's most famous psalm has made the image of being cared for by the Lord as our shepherd so familiar we instantly understand and recognize something we have never actually quite seen. God is always present with us, shepherding, guiding, restoring even through the darkest, anxious, fearful times of our lives. When stress and distress roar like a raging sea, God the shepherd leads us to still waters. God's rod and staff offers us security when we face trouble, and we can rest in the protective care of our shepherd. God's goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives, come what may.

We know Jesus as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, for us, his flock. He knows his precious sheep, and his sheep know him, we know his voice. By his word and his teachings we have guidance and direction. Without this, we can easily be led astray, lost and wander onto dangerous paths. Our good shepherd feeds us the bread of life and calls us to come to him, all who labor and are heavy laden, and he will give us rest.

On this Mother's Day it is right and fitting that we reflect on the feminine side of shepherding as the prophet Isaiah did when he spoke of God as a shepherd, "Like a shepherd you feed your flock, gathering the lambs in your arms, and carrying them in your bosom, and gently leading the mother sheep."

And while it may seem that Mother's Day in the US was created by florists and card makers, it was really begun by a woman, a mother, Ann Reeves Jarvis, who cared for wounded soldiers on both sides of the field during the Civil War. Following the war she organized a "Mothers' Friendship Day," the goal of which was to foster reconciliation between former Union and Confederate soldiers by having them come together, along with mothers, from both sides. She shepherded enemies in a vulnerable, fragile time, on the raw edges of war, to provide opportunities for reconciliation, restoration and peace.

Long before Ann Reeves Jarvis tended to the needs of wounded soldiers, there was Tabitha, Dorcas, a faithful woman, a mother of the church, a disciple, a follower of the Way, who was a shepherd to the most vulnerable of people in her time—widows. Both Hebrew and Christian scriptures repeatedly proclaim God's desire for widows to be treated with care and compassion, with kindness and justice.

Tabitha was a follower, a believer, by her words and by her actions. Our NRSV bible says that she was, "devoted to good works and acts of charity," but the Common English Bible, also describes Tabitha's faithful spirit and character as it reads, "Her life overflowed with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need."

The effects of her ministry, her good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need, were what summoned Peter when she became ill and died. On the raw edge of their grief, widowed women who had nursed her frail body during her illness then cared for her after her death, washed her as one final gift of gratitude for her loving care of them.

The weeping, grieving widows showed Peter the tunics and other clothing that Tabitha had made for them. She had ministered to each of them by the clothing that she had made, and perhaps she had also shepherded them in their grief when their husbands died, or through their own times of illness, or emptiness, protecting them from loneliness and isolation, as well as

nakedness. In their hands they held the evidence of God's love for them, of Jesus' love, given for them, thread by thread, stitch by stitch.

Peter sent everyone out of the room, leaving him alone with this beloved disciple. He knelt down beside Tabitha and prayed before saying, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes and sat up. Peter took her by the hand and joyfully reunited her with her community.

Peter had followed the voice of the good shepherd, and Tabitha had followed his voice too. Each disciple --then and now--is called to listen for the voice of our shepherd. Each disciple--then and now-- is called to share the love of Jesus in their life. Each disciple--- then and now-- is commanded to love their neighbor by the gifts and talents they have been given. Each disciple ---then and now-- is to listen for the voice of the Shepherd, for in faith, we know his voice of love. Each disciple ---then and now—is bound in relationship to care for the vulnerable with attention, affection, care and patience, to soothe the raw edges for one another.

This is how we follow the Lord, our shepherd as surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in God's house forever. Amen.