

Welcome Home
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Psalm 23

Last week I had the pleasure of joining 10 middlers and 2 wonderful adult volunteers from both St. John's and Covenant Presbyterian churches to a place called "Massanetta Springs"

Massanetta Springs is a presbyterian camp and conference center nestled in the hills of the Shenandoah Valley. Massanetta Springs was first a location in the 1800s for annual meetings of the Methodist Episcopal church in the summer—the springs on the property were known to have fresh mountain spring water that folks would flock to--the ice-cold waters were believed to be healing if you drank it. While that may not be the case, I can attest to spending a weekend on that campus can lead to some much-needed healing.

This summer we celebrated 50 years of middle school conferences and last summer we celebrated Massanetta's 100th birthday. Massanetta's mission is to provide a place for all people to experience God through renewal, discovery, and hospitality.

But that's all the stuff you'll find online about Massanetta. When you hear a middler (massanetta lingo for middle school student) talk about Massanetta, they're smiling from ear to ear because it is a place where they are known, welcomed and loved, fed, nourished and challenged. A place for play, a place to just be, and most of all a place to learn more about God.

One thing that is particularly unique about Massanetta are the Advocates. Advocates are high school students that apply and interview to come spend two weeks leading the middle school conference. They pay to spend two weeks of their summer helping middle school youth grow in faith. They design meaningful skits, lead worship and recreation, and most notably provide a space in encounter groups for youth to reflect upon what they're learning about God with their walk of discipleship.

This year our theme for the middle school conference was "Welcome Home" and as a part of each keynote our advocates shared their definition of home:

- a place where I can depend upon people and people can depend upon me
- not a place or a person but a feeling when accepted and welcome
- a place of security among fellow peers and family
- when I am in centered in my faith
- where I feel most comfortable
- a place without the fear of judgement
- unconditional love, the breeze on my skin, laughing until my stomach hurts.
- where I feel god's unconditional love.

The list goes on, but these were just a snapshot of some.

Our keynoter Ekema expanded our minds in ways we hadn't thought of, and our small groups (called encounter groups) helped us learn from one another as we debriefed what we were

learning together. Our workshops brought our brains hearts and hands together as we painted rocks, made collages, practiced spiritual disciplines, wrote our own Psalms, and engaged in Holy Chaos. Oh, and we remembered our baptism—both when Ekema sprayed us with water from the baptismal font, AND when we slid down the water slide.

Our theme focused on Psalm 23 all four days, unpacking it piece by piece. Much like our homes, Psalm 23 is a Psalm that we return to time and time again, but...if we peel back a few layers, peek behind something that hasn't been moved in a while, we remember things about God that we had perhaps shelved in our busy lives of to-dos and appointments.

Psalm 23 is likely the most well-known psalm of the 150. Many have it memorized, and it is often recited corporately, especially at funerals. It provides comfort in a time of need, reassurance when there is doubt, and affirmation. In many ways, Psalm 23 roots us back to our home in our creator God.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want—

Sheep and shepherds are common metaphors in the Old Testament. God is often mentioned as the shepherd of his people Israel. Only once, though, do we find the name Yahweh Ra'ah, meaning "The LORD is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1).

Shepherding is one of the oldest occupations. Its purpose is found in its name "sheep" and "herd"—one who tends, takes care of, protects. Sheep can provide so much when they are cared for, tended to—milk, wool, meat.

In other translations, "I shall not want" is translated as "I lack nothing" or "I have what I need"

We have enough because God is enough.
enough time, enough love, enough money, enough talent, enough food, enough opportunity,
enough grace.

The lord is our shepherd and we are his sheep. God has created all that is around us—every good and great thing we have is thanks to God. The Bible is filled with stories of God providing water from a rock, manna from heaven, delivery from the bonds of slavery, bread and fish to feed the masses, direction in the wilderness. God's provision has been there all along, whether we can see it at the time or not, and it has led us to this day, this place. Out of God's provision, God's tender loving care, I wonder today, what we are being called to be for our communities, who we can be with what God has given us—The Lord is our shepherd and we have everything we need.

He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul

One of the things we talked about last week was just how active God is in this psalm. David is writing to a God who is alive and well in his life: protecting, guiding, challenging. And here, we see that our God is a God of rest. Our God is a God who leads us to rest, perhaps even forcing us to stop. To sit by still waters. To sit still. To breathe.

I jokingly said a couple weeks ago while leading a parent meeting on Zoom that if they saw my hand moving around in the screen that they should just ignore that, because my foster dog Seamus has very strong opinions on my work hours. Seamus decides when I am done working on my computer at night. And sometimes that means he literally will climb into my lap, all 75 pounds of him will force his way into the screen and on to the tiny arm chair I am sitting in. I laugh about it, but it makes me think of this verse. Because as busy people, we can easily be so focused on doing and doing and doing—we can fall into the trap of people pleasing and wanting all the great things for our family...and it leading to running from one thing to another thing to another, shoving dinner down your throat while you're driving and finally arriving home at 8:30pm only to go to bed and do it all over again.

But that's not the life God wants for us. That's the life the world wants for us—the world wants us to grind. The world tells us that fulfillment comes in more and more and more. But God says...I have given you everything you need, and then some. God leads us home to ourselves, God restores our souls, and God calls us to be people of restoration.

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Our keynoter Ekema is from Nigeria, but has lived many places, London for example when she was a teenager. She remembers when she was younger that her family would always touch base at dinner. That would be when they called their family back home in Africa, it was when they watched the BBC—the world news was always that thing that connected them to their family, gave them something to engage in, and then it would lead to...

-Did you go to that dinner party? What did so and so wear? Did they make that thing again that no one likes?

-How is so and so handling life without her partner?

-What are you looking forward to this week?

For Ekema, the news was a tradition that she clung to even in young adult hood in NYC. During the pandemic, she would mark her days by turning on the news at 5pm and eating dinner, calling her family, checking in. Once she was able to visit her family, Ekema traveled to see them in Texas where they now live.

The first night she sat down for dinner and noticed that her brother, sister, and parents didn't have on the news. Why aren't we watching the news? She asked

Oh, we don't watch the news anymore, it's too scary. Just like that—her family tradition ceased. The darkness of the world became too much to bear. And yet, we know we can't turn off the darkness in this world with a simple power button and a routine change. The darkness of this world is all around us—in schools, grocery stores, cities, schools, the internet. Walking through the valley of the shadow of death is not an "if" but a "when".

And our psalmist reminds us this morning our psalmist tells us that while we are fearful, we can take solace in the fact that God has tools to comfort us—thy rod and thy staff—the very thing shepherds use to guide are the things that are there to help protect when needed.

One of our workshops was called “coming home to myself” and we focused on how the darkness of the world can be overwhelming. We made art filling in all the possible things that could be replaced with “Shadow of Death”

Yea though I walk through the valley of depression, school pressure, rumors, anxiety, climate change, gun violence, bullying, eating disorders, loneliness, injuries, losing friends, hate.

God comforts us, and God gives us tools to lead us not around it, but through it. The youth had the opportunity to make a piece of art outlining what they could control about things and what they couldn't. Reminding themselves that when the darkness overwhelms them, that they can focus on the things they *can* control. To breathe—the inhale the gift of breath—holy spirit--- the very presence of God and come home to ourselves so that we can control what we can—and be God's tools of comfort to those in our lives and communities that may also be walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

There are so many things in the world that are scary and the darkness is a part of life—part of being human. But we worship a God who went into the dark valley for us so that when we go through it, we may know that we are not alone.

Our keynoter encouraged us to think about the tools God has given us to experience God's comfort when we find ourselves in the darkness. When we are comforted, we feel most at home.

Thou preparest a table with my enemies, you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Here God moves from a shepherd to a party host. One who invites us to remember that even our enemies—are children of God. God calls us to be responsible for how we think about and relate to those we call enemies. And here at this table, we remember that God welcomes all, not just the righteous ones, or the ones who have it all right. God welcomes the “other” in our lives—in a time when we are most divided, it is needed more than ever. God is at this table.

The final night of Massanetta, we gathered in a dark sanctuary illumined by our middlers handmade luminaries and sang acapella in the darkness of the night. We came forward when the night was singing its song-frogs and crickets, the quiet blinking of fireflies, leaves dripping water in the wind from the afternoon thunderstorm. Here in this sacred space we had gathered at time and time again all weekend, we anointed one another's heads with oil saying “The Lord is your shepherd and God loves you”

Here we marked our relationship with God in a holy space remembering that God is our provider, God is our Guide, God calls us to rest, God calls us to trust, God calls us to love.

God is at this table. Here, God sings to our souls “Welcome Home”

Let us dine. Let us remember. Let us leave nourished to walk with our shepherd all the days of our life.