

To Revive My Drooping Spirit

Psalm 23; Mark 6:30-34; 53-56

4 Easter, 2009

Lord, you are my Shepherd;
there is nothing I shall want.
Fresh and green are the pastures
where you give me repose.
Near restful waters you lead me
to revive my drooping spirit.
You guide me along the right path;
you are true to your name.
If I should walk in the valley of darkness
no evil would I fear.
You are there with your crook and your staff;
with these you give me comfort.
You have prepared a banquet for me
in the sight of my foes.
My head you have anointed with oil;
my cup is overflowing.
Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me
all the days of my life.
In the Lord's own house shall I dwell
for ever and ever.

Near restful waters he leads me, to revive my drooping spirit.... Have you ever seen one of those? It's a pitiful thing -- to see a spirit drooping. A sad and pitiful thing, indeed. But you see them, don't you? You see them all around you. Sad, sad faces scored beyond their years by misery and grief. What was the song they used to sing? **"Gloom, despair, and agony on me."** Was that it? **"Deep, dark depression, excessive misery..."** Pitiful. Just pitiful. That's why God invented country music, I think. So miserable people could let other people know just how miserable they are. With songs like, **How Can I Miss You If You Won't Go Away?** or **I'm Just a Bug on the Windshield of Life**, or my personal favorite, **You Done Tore Out My Heart and You Stomped that Sucker Flat.**

See what I mean? It's ... the world is just full of pitiful people. And so is the Church, mind you. Not *this* church, of course. But *other* churches. They are. And pulpits are full of them, too. Really, they are. [Now why didn't you gasp in astonishment there... You're supposed to be surprised!]

When I was in seminary, I was a pastoral intern at the Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Durham (not too far from the ballpark where the Durham Bulls played baseball). And the church was new. They hadn't even built it, yet! So on Sunday mornings we gathered in an old dance hall -- a disco or something. And that's where we worshiped. Now they have a beautiful building. And the church is doing well. Growing by leaps and bounds, just like everything else down there, I guess. But it all started in disco!

And Aldersgate wasn't the only one, mind you. There was another church that started out the same way ... in an old dance hall. And it started out kind of small, too, I suppose. And the people there were trying to save every penny they could so they bought some old pews from a church that had just remodeled their sanctuary. And they used carpet remnants for the center aisle and sewed them together -- like a big patchwork quilt, in a way.

And it did the job well. At least, for the first year or so. But then the seams started to loosen a bit. And if

you weren't careful your foot would catch and down you'd go.

And they *knew*, they just *knew* that one fine Sunday morning, some poor acolyte would go tumbling down the aisle with his taperlighter lit, catch his foot in a loose seam, and down he would go. Flame, robe, carpet and all! A disaster waiting to happen! ✠ And there were some seniors there, too. Elderly people. And the pastor's wife kept warning him that if they didn't get it fixed in a hurry, some dear old woman might trip and fall. And if she did, he and the trustees would be better off if they all died and went straight to the place where the pipes never freeze! And he was pretty sure she wasn't talking about Florida!

So he did. He brought it up to the trustees. Brought it up every month. And every month they all agreed that they were going to have to get on the ball and do something about it before *somebody* got hurt. Or sued. Or both.

Well ... one Sunday morning (that summer), Jerry, the pastor, was in his study *meditating*, he said. And all

of a sudden it dawned on him that *that was the organ* he heard. The Prelude had started. It'd been going on for a while! And he jumped up from his chair, grabbed his robe and his bible ... and the zipper got stuck. Not on his bible, mind you. The one on his *robe!* So there he was hurrying down the aisle with his bible under his arm, jerking up on his zipper, and trying to turn to the right page in the bulletin all at the same time! And just as he reached the front of the sanctuary, right there in front of God's own people, his foot slipped under a loose seam, and he **lunged** forward.

And somehow, believe it or not, he managed stay on his feet.... But Preacher Jerry wore a toupee. And, mind you, when he stopped... it didn't. It kept going right on up the aisle. Looked like a small furry animal had jumped off his head. And he snatched it in midair, slapped it back on his head, and proceeded very calmly and coolly up to the pulpit.

And people were kind. They were. No one shouted, "Good catch!" or "Way to go, Rev." or anything like that. But when he turned around and faced them, it just all went to pieces. Mass hysteria! It took them a

good ten minutes to recover, he said. Because he had put his toupee back up there sideways! (With the part in his hair running from ear to ear, mind you.)

And **that's** why God invented country music! He did it for people like Jerry! Poor, pathetic, pitiful people for whom *any other* form of expression just doesn't say all that needs to be said. So you end up with songs like **I'm So Miserable Without You, It's Almost Like Having You Here**, or **I'd Rather have a Bottle in Front of Me Than a Frontal Lobotomy**, and **How Can a Whiskey Six Years Old Whip a Man That's 32?** And ..., I'm not a great fan of country music. Believe me, I'm not. But I think I could catch on to some of those tunes. [And] maybe even sing a few of them. Really. And maybe you could, too. Because we *all* know about misery, don't we?

We know about Murphy's law -- when everything that **can** go wrong **does**. It just does. Haven't you had days like that? And we know about waking up on the wrong side of the bed, or living or working with people who do. And we know about **bad hair days** and days

when we (and other **people**) would have been better off if we had just stayed in bed.

Oh, and we know about *broken water lines*, and *dead batteries*, and *flat tires*, and *burnt toast*... And we know about *broken hearts* and *shattered dreams* and *poor health*, or the *weariness* that comes with this world we live in that makes us think we have to be busy all the time. Rush, rush, rush. Oh, we're so busy trying to live a fulfilling life that we don't have time to be fulfilled! And it all goes round and round and the pressure builds, and the burdens grow heavier, and our hearts and our souls and even our bodies grow weary. They do.

But listen to this. There's a shepherd, says Mark. You know the One. He's there in the Prayer Book, the Hymnal -- the Psalter they called it. Hymn number 23. You know the tune. It goes like this. It says, **Lord, you are my Shepherd; there is nothing I shall want. Fresh and green are the pastures where you give me repose. Near restful waters you lead me, to revive my drooping spirit ...**

And he says, **Come. Come to me all you who are weary and so heavy laden, and I will give you rest.** ✠
Come away with me to a quiet place and rest awhile...
Just rest....

Jesus gave the disciples a job to do. Remember what it was? He sent them out two by two into all the little towns and villages there. And he told them to preach the gospel. Tell the Good News -- not from the local pulpits, mind you, but out on the streets. On the corners. At the fish monger's place and the produce stands and all the places where people don't really want to be bothered. Go down there and tell them to repent (to turn their lives "God-ward"). And if they're sick, heal them. And cast out their demons.

And they went. All twelve of them. And while they were gone something terrible happened. John the Baptist was murdered. Murdered by a drunken king at a birthday party! Jesus' cousin. The one who baptized him. The one who prepared the way for him had been murdered.

And there he was... with that terrible news and twelve bone-weary disciples who had so much to tell him and so much to sort out. And Jesus said, “Come. Come away with me to a quiet place and rest awhile.” It’s time to get away. And so he led them to pastures fresh and green to give them repose, as it says in the psalm. Near restful waters he led them to revive their drooping spirits.

I do that sometimes. I go to the monastery (Saint Meinrad) for a private retreat. And one of the monks, Father Eric, told me that people often come for a week or two of spiritual renewal and for the first two or three days they sleep. Sounds like a waste of time, doesn’t it?

But that’s what happens. “People are weary from all the busy-ness of their lives. And they’re worn down by stress and worry and they don’t even know it! So,” he said, “we tell them to rest. Because that’s what God wants for them. He wants them to rest.”

So they all climbed in the boat and they headed for a quiet place on the other side of the lake. But other

folks caught wind of it somehow. Or maybe they just spotted them there in the boat. And they wanted to be with Jesus, too. So they ran around to the other side. And when Jesus stepped out of the boat, there they were -- this huge crowd of people. It's like Murphy's law right there in the bible! They needed rest. They needed to get away. But they couldn't. The crowd wouldn't let them! Oh, I bet they wanted to scream! Wouldn't you? You'd just want to pull your hair out!

So Jesus stepped out of the boat and he looked at all of those people. And it did something to him. His heart was stirred. And he looked at them with compassion, says Mark, because they were like sheep. They were like sheep without a shepherd.

And a sheep without a shepherd is a pitiful thing. Because ... you know what they do? They get lost. They nibble away at the grass and they never look up. And the next thing you know they're all alone out on the cliffs, or stuck in the brambles and briars. And without a shepherd, who will lead them to pastures fresh and green? And who will walk with them through the dark valleys, or watch over them with their rod and their

staff? And who will soothe their wounds with oil or see to it that they are well-fed?

That's what he saw when he looked at the crowd. He saw people -- people who were weary and longing for rest. People who were hungry -- who longed for healing. People who were lost in life with no one to turn to ... So Jesus said, Come. Come to me all you who are weary and so overburdened” And he taught them. He led them in the paths that were right and true. And if you read on, he fed them. All of them. With nothing more than a few barley loaves and a couple of fish. And he stayed with them all day, listening and touching them deeply and making them whole.

And when it was all over and they had crossed the lake to the other side, people recognized him. And they all went running at once to bring the sick. And wherever he went, in the towns or the cities or out in the country, they'd bring the ones who were miserably sick and broken and wounded. And they begged him to just let them touch the hem of his cloak. And Jesus said, “Come. And the broken were healed. And the

hungry were fed. The lost were found, And their drooping spirits were revived.

Isn't it funny? Here we are on the Sabbath day. (Which for Christians is now the *first* day of the week.) A day of rest. It's why you're here isn't it? You thought you came to support your church. Or to see your friends. Or maybe you thought you came here because somebody said you had to be here. Somebody named mom or dad.... Or was it that little voice that keeps saying, "Shame on you if you aren't."

But underneath all those voices is another voice and another reason. And the voice is the voice of Jesus the Shepherd saying, "Come. Come away with me. Come all that are weary in body or in spirit. Come, all who are heavy-laden with illness and stress and worry and fear.... and I will give you rest." So you're here. You came. For he is your Shepherd ... and in their heart of hearts the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

Do you hear? Jesus calls us to rest your heart in his love, that your drooping spirit may be revived and strengthened for the journey ahead. So, **"Come,"** says

Jesus. **“Come to me all who are weary and overburdened in life Come, all you who are weighed down by stress, or illness, or worry, or fear. Come all of you who long for peace and fulfillment ... and I will give you rest.”**

I used to go to church with my grandma on Sunday evenings sometimes when I was a boy. And Sunday evening at her church wasn't anything like Sunday mornings at our church in Wayne. Because they didn't have bulletins. And the preacher didn't do the usual “three points and a poem”. But he just kind of shot from the hip (or from the heart, I think) when he stood in the pulpit. And they didn't even have numbers up on the hymn-board. Because the preacher would just say, “Does anyone have a favorite?” And someone would call out a number or say, “How about, ‘There's Power in the Blood,’ or ‘Blessed Assurance,’ or some other old favorite.

And my grandma would say, “Number ninety.” And they'd all turn to number 90 in their little brown Cokesbury hymnals. And I have to tell you, I didn't care for that song. Didn't care for it one bit! Truth is I

thought it was dreadful! Because I was a growing boy, mind you. And growing boys like to *think* that they're men (or soon will be). And that hymn didn't sound very manly, at all Because it talked about roses and whispers and something so sweet, mind you, that the birds hushed their singing... A far cry from **A Mighty Fortress Is Our God** or **Onward Christian Soldiers (marching as to WAR!)** So when I sang it, I just kind of mumbled along so nobody would hear me saying all that mushy stuff.

But I was a kid. Just a boy at the time. And I have to tell you... that hymn, ***In the Garden***, was one of my grandmother's favorites. And I'd hear her sing it sometimes when she had her devotions there at the kitchen table. Or when she was working around the house or out in the garden. And the next thing I knew, I was singing it, too: **And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.**

And my grandmother told me that that song was about Easter morning, when Mary saw Jesus there in

the garden, and all of her sadness and fear was lifted away like some heavy burden she could hardly lift up.

And I thought about her being alone in the garden with Jesus. And I remember thinking that's what my grandmother did every morning and every evening when she had her devotion -- her quiet time, she called it. She was with Jesus in a quiet place, where he walked with her, and talked with her, and told her again and again that she was his own.

It's a big, big part of being a Christian, I think, and following Jesus. To go to a quiet place, apart from the world, and just waiting quietly for him to reach out and enfold you with his love and his grace. And then to go back to the world and love him there, too, in the people around you.

The Irish call it being in a **thin place** -- where the wall between us and God is so thin that his love can flow through and touch you.... Is there a place like that for you? A quiet time in your day, just ten minutes or so, when you can say to the Lord, "Lord, you are my Shepherd," and just know that he's with you? Have

you done that lately? Sometimes when the stress and the worry and burdens pile up, God doesn't seem real. God seems far away -- even farther than the tiniest star you can see in the sky. But he invites you to come. Take time to be still, just for a few moments or as long as you need to. Be still and know that he is the Lord. And let him feed you, and touch you, and bring his healing love into your life and into your heart.

Come ... Come to me all you who are weary and so heavy laden, says Jesus, **and I will give you rest.**

SOLI DEO GLORIA

BENEN, OBLSB

