

“In Praise of the Passive”
Psalm 23
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There are some people in the world who are passive and—while maybe that's everyone at one time or another—most of us tend to be either passive or active in our approach to life. Passive people tend to have things happen *to* them. Active people tend to act upon other things. And—though we all can be either, depending on the situation or the stage of our life—we seem to have an innate tendency toward one or the other. Now, mind you, there is no right answer; one isn't better than the other; each has its strengths and weaknesses.

So...which are you? Still aren't sure?

Well, think of your relationships, marriage, friendships; if you're a passive person you might be someone who wants to be taken care of, while an active person wants to be the caretaker. Who are you? Are you a caretaker or do you like to be taken care of?

And while we might have a natural inclination towards one over the other, it could be that the answer to that question is *yes* ...or *both*...because there are times in our lives that call for one or the other.

Sometimes we are called to be a caretaker. When someone we love is ill; when a problem arises that we can help them with; when someone has a need that we can fulfill; we step into the role as caretaker. But what about the other way? Do you allow people to take care of you? Or do you live in the illusion that you can do everything yourself?

To take the point even further, we can choose to be passive or active with how we manage ourselves,

our own lives. Some people are very intentional in attending to themselves and their needs—their overall health, fitness, career, finances. These people seem to be always playing their A-game. While others of us (like me) are less driven, more easy-going about what the details of our lives.

I suppose I raise this question today, after reading the 23rd Psalm, because, regardless of who we are in relationship to one another, we *are* in **relationship**... with ourselves, our loved ones and with God.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters; he restores my soul.”

Here we start with our relationship with God. And clearly God is active while the psalmist is passive. Things happen to the psalmist, and God is the caretaker, the guide, the host, the shepherd. God is the active one.

But I think that sometimes we try to be the active one in our relationship with God. I was talking this week with someone in the church about the relationship we can have with God and the nature of prayer. How we often pray for something, for ourselves or others; or to thank God for a blessing, we often take the active role in prayer. I jokingly offered that maybe we all should listen to God instead of doing all the talking. We laughed, but—in reflecting on this psalm—I think there is something to that. I don’t think we take enough time being on the passive end with God, listening, waiting, just being with God.

I was reading *Feasting on the Word* this week where Jeff Paschal, who is pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Wooster, Ohio, and he comments on this psalm:

In our culture, which clings to the myth of 'rugged individualism' and 'self-made' people, the psalmist instead proclaims the truth—none of us is 'self-made.' None of us is strong and independent. We are God-made, utterly dependent upon the shepherd. Yes, we work, save, study, and plan, but God is ultimately the one who meets our needs. God is the one who makes us rest. God is the one who slows us down and restores our very being.”¹

1 Paschal, Jeff. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2*. p. 432.

God is the active while the psalmist is the passive. How are we active in our relationship with God?

This is this the same as being active in our relationship with ourselves. Prayer is the ultimate action, both with God and with self. Do we take time to listen to God, to ourselves? Do we rest, wait, or just be with ourselves, or do we always have to be the active one?

This psalm is the most familiar of all the psalms. It is the one we have hanging in a cross-stitch pattern on our walls. We think of it most often when we think of the passing of our loved ones because it reflects a journey, from this world to the next.

But it is also about the journey we take in life, and the relationships that shape this journey: with our own self, our loved ones and God. This is why it is so appropriate for this Good Shepherd Sunday. It is also why it is a good one for our 3rd graders to learn each year. It is about life!

Yes some find great comfort in this psalm as they contemplate the end of life but we can also find great comfort as we journey through life. On this Good Shepherd Sunday I want us to think about God as our shepherd for the *whole* journey. That is why this the psalm that we teach our kids. So that they have it their whole lives long, have these words in their memories, these images seated in their minds so that they can draw on them in times of need. We love our children and we hope that they will go through their lives with never a hurt, no pain, no broken hearts. But that's not going to happen. We realize that there are times when we all are passive, when things happen to us, things that we don't want. Will they know that they can depend on God? Will they remember "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want?" Will they have that relationship with God where they can know that they are in God's hands?

That's who we are with God, and even ourselves, but let's get back to the initial question. How are we with one another? Are we active or passive in our relationships with one another?

One passage in this psalm has always bothered me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. I don't know about you but I've always viewed it as God setting a table, a feast for *me*, and my "enemies" have to stand there and see that God loves me, maybe even favors me, I am his invited guest, I am the one seated in the place of honor. Maybe they don't get to eat but must stand there and watch. I suppose we've all imagined this scene when we hear the psalm through our woundedness or self-righteousness.

But what if God, in his activeness, is seeking to heal the woundedness by bringing to us those who've we hurt and those who have hurt us?

Or we can take it even further and imagine that the presence of our enemies is a reminder that they are already there at the with God and it is I who is must see that *they* are loved by God?

What if God is setting a table for me not just in the presence of my enemies, but with my enemies.

What if the table is for us, all of us, friends and enemies and acquaintances and everyone else? What if in this kingdom, if we just let God create it, there is no us and not-us, no allies and enemies, but what if we really are all in this together? What if the journey is about relationship?

On this communion Sunday, what if this is the table, the one that Christ sets—and remember that night before his arrest he sat down with his disciples and invited all of them to take part? And that means all of them—Thomas who doubted him, Peter who denied him, Judas who betrayed him, and all the others

who ran away and hid when he needed them. That's who we are with one another. We are all part of God's kingdom, all children of God. Because that's how God has made us. He was the active one in that creative act, but now we can act with God, welcoming all to the table, making sure all these artificial walls we have built to keep people apart get torn down. That's an active role we can take. What if Psalm 23 speaks to our souls more than any other because it is the image of the peaceable kingdom that all of us long for? What if this psalm is about not only the place to which we hope our loved ones have gone by the grace of God, but the place he is building here and now? That's a psalm worth remembering and teaching to our children.