

Together

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Southern Ohio/Kentucky District Church of the Brethren

Beside
Still
Waters

Psalm 23

It goes without saying that we are living in challenging times. Are they more challenging than living through the Civil War, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, or the turbulence of the 1960's? It's safe to say that each generation experienced events that tested their faith and trust in God. And this doesn't even take into account the personal struggles we face with family, health, finances, and so forth.

Psalm 23 is probably the most familiar passage in all the Bible. Even those who have never been to church or have no knowledge of the Bible have probably heard the words of this psalm. Why is it so well-known? What is it about these words that seem to resonate with people?

I think it speaks to a part of life to which we can all relate. When we find ourselves buffeted by the winds and waves of turbulent situations, we long for quiet, still waters. The good news is that we have a Good Shepherd who will lead us to them.



Hueston Woods State Park, by Jan Futrell.

We often look to other people and places to find these peaceful waters. That was how it was when the psalm was written. Back then it was the responsibility of the king to provide for and protect the people, but many times he failed in this task. The same holds true today. Yet in contrast to the failure of our earthly "kings," God does what a shepherd is supposed to do: provide life and security for the people.

Moreover, while these words communicate a sense of peace and tranquility, they also tell us that God provides so much more. To "lie down in green pastures" means to have food; to be led "beside still waters" can also mean to have something to drink; to be led "in right paths" means that danger is avoided

and proper shelter is found. In other words, God provides everything we need for life.

When (not if) we find ourselves in the dark valleys of life, the Good Shepherd walks with us, leading us and guiding us to green pastures, right paths, and still waters. I am convinced that Psalm 23 is not only for funerals but for all of life's challenges and tumult. When you encounter these storms may you seek the Good Shepherd—the only one—to lead you to still waters.

Nick Beam,
District Executive Minister

A Source of Calm: Meditating on Scripture

Submitted by Karen Garrett

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 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.



Psalm 23 is one of the most well-known Psalm. We share it here to remind us that Scripture can be a powerful source of calm and hope. Perhaps you memorized this Psalm in a version that uses the phrase *leads me in paths of righteousness* or the phrase *valley of the shadow of death*. There is great comfort in recalling words we have memorized. There is the possibility of understanding scripture more deeply when we consider other translations.

Regardless the Scripture translation you prefer, using Lectio Divina when meditating on scripture can clear our minds of distractions.

- First, read and listen to the verses, that means even if you are alone, read the words aloud.
- Second, reflect on a word or phrase that caught your attention. Ponder that word or words. What yearning in your soul might they speak to? In what ways

does the phrase, verse, or the entire passage draw you closer in your relationship to Jesus? Which of your senses, sight, smell, touch, hearing, are most alert as you meditate on the particular scripture passage?

Placing scripture in conversation with itself can be empowering. Psalm 23 is echoed in Psalm 138 verse 7. *Though I walk in the midst of trouble, / you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; / you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.*

Another thing to note is that Psalm 23 directly follows Psalm 22, which opens with the sentence *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* By the final verse of Psalm 22, the psalmist has shifted from feeling forsaken to a sense of hope. The next line of scripture is: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*. This reminds us that whatever valley we face, meditating on Scripture brings hope.

Pleasant Hill Church Update

by Brian Leingang

The last two years at the Pleasant Hill Church of the Brethren have been filled with change, loss, hope, adaptability, and persistence. Since our long-time pastor, Nick Beam, stepped down to become Interim District Executive, our church has been searching for a new pastor. In the meantime, we continue the work of the church while accepting that sometimes we have to look inward for solutions.

Change forces us to re-evaluate what matters. As our interim pastor, Fred Bernhard brought not only experience, leadership, and energy but also changes. Among these was a call to renew our fellowship with each other, which had long been suppressed due to COVID. Another was a push to invite and welcome people to the church.

What would become the most impactful change was Fred's invitation to members to deliver the message. We have many storytellers for our children's time, but none of us had ever thought about taking over the preaching role. In January 2023, Fred asked me to deliver the message while he and Joice were traveling. I was a little nervous, but it was hard to say "no" to Fred. Later that year, two more members of the congregation delivered the message, too.

We did not know it then, but this was part of Fred's plan. By the next January, Fred had gathered four of us to ask us to consider shared ministry. The plan was that he would stay on as pastor to guide us in taking over the pastoral roles. He also told us about the Education for Shared Ministry program through the Brethren Academy for Shared Leadership. We said we would consider it.

There ended up being little time to think about it. With Fred's cancer diagnosis and sudden passing in March, our team needed to step up. We were guided by Dave Shetler and were fortunate enough to retain Tom and Paula Bowser to serve as interim pastors for a few months. Four of us—Matt Downing, Jeri Fox, Richard Fox, and myself—write and deliver sermons, while Lynda Adams provides much needed pastoral care. We are also fortunate to have a strong worship team and deacon group. We have been on our own since July, and hope it will continue to go well.

The work at Pleasant Hill continues. Our summer Lunch Bunch program for children in our community averaged 30 children a week. We stock a small Blessing Box outside of our church that needs to be filled often. We have monthly programs for seniors and work to provide opportunities for our youth and adult members.

Operating the church is also a team effort. Our

secretary, Sarah Addington, keeps everything running. One person opens the church on Sundays, and others make sure it is closed. We have a small team of people who tend to maintenance and a group of volunteers who mow. Sometimes, it feels like everyone has a job at the church!

In many ways, all of our changes have made us closer as a congregation. We spend a lot of time talking to each other before and after service. Perhaps we see how precious this time is. Fred was not the only person our church lost in the last two years; many faced illness and injuries. People who were foundational to our church have passed away or moved to the Brethren Retirement Community. But, we have also experienced some growth by welcoming new members.

There is a philosophical question called "The Ship of Theseus," which asks how many boards you can replace on a ship before it is no longer the original. Pleasant Hill Church of the Brethren is a bit like that: people come and go, but our church is still our church. After all, as the hymn goes, "the church is the people."



Happy Hikers

by J. Trent Smith

There are two things, among many, that are important to us at Happy Corner: being good stewards of God's gifts and getting the ministry of the church outside the walls of the building. With those things in mind, and a desire to model for the church taking a risk by starting something new, I decided to take a small, booted step of faith and start a hiking group. I, for one, love getting outside and hiking. I knew that others in the congregation shared a similar interest too. So in the Spring of 2022 we began the Happy Hikers hiking group.

We meet year-round on Wednesdays (except for August) and take hikes in our local state and metroparks. On any given Wednesday there may be from two to a dozen hikers gathering to explore a new trail and enjoy God's creation. We gather rain or shine, snow or mosquitoes. Our hikes range from a couple miles to nearly six miles (our longest hike to date). We try to vary



Gratis Church Baptism at Twin Creek

by Shawn Wilges

There is nothing greater than when a person surrenders their life to Jesus Christ and becomes born again. It is worth more than a million dollars or the greatest treasure ever. The Bible records that all of Heaven throws a party when it happens. In Luke 15:7, Jesus states, "I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance." Later, in Luke 15:10, he says, "Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner." How exciting are those days of being a new creature in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17)!

The wonderful next step that Jesus so beautifully laid out for us is baptism (Matthew 3:13). In the Church of the Brethren, we call it trine immersion. According to Matthew 28:19-20, we baptize in the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Of course, the person being baptized gets very wet too!

At Gratis Church of the Brethren, we have a very special place in which we do our baptisms. It is off Enterprise Rd, just outside of Gratis, Ohio. We stop at the Twin Creek bridge and make our way down to the creek. We usually start praying a week or two before the baptism for a good pool of water there.



For many reasons, it is a beautiful spot for us. First, there is graffiti under the bridge, and the baptismal candidate stands with their back to it. This is a fitting way to remember our old life; that we were sinners separated from God and we walked out living a new life in Christ (Romans 5:8-9). Secondly, it is a wonderful feeling to be in the fresh air and baptizing the way many did long before church baptistries were installed. Finally, I recently learned that the first cabin in which the early Church of the Brethren folks met was located just about 50 feet from where we now baptize under the bridge. A person could pick up a rock from our baptism site and throw it right to that spot. For many years, we have continued the tradition of having baptisms at the site where the early Brethren had done theirs. How nostalgic and wonderful to be a part of that. God is so good! It is an absolute blessing that the Gratis Church of the Brethren is still going strong and continuing the work of Jesus – simply, peacefully and together – until we are taken up with our Lord to be present with Him forever!



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our hikes each month, walking a mixture of rough, natural trails and paved and ADA accessible trails. For several hikes, we have even welcomed folks in wheelchairs.

The Happy Hikers have explored forest trails, prairies, fens, creek crossings, ponds, pine forests, ash forests, waterfalls, etc. We have encountered snakes, turtles, frogs, toads, spiders, squirrels, deer, chipmunks, and countless birds. Along the way we have learned to identify certain types of trees and recognize certain types of flowers. We have even picked up trash. And as the miles roll on, we

find that we are growing together in community. We have the opportunity to talk and to get to know one another, all while God's beautiful landscapes slide by as the backdrop to our conversations.

Have we revolutionized the ministry of the church by starting this group? Likely not. Perhaps we are a little healthier for getting out, enjoying some fresh air, and walking. But it does stress for the church that God is present in places other than inside the church building and active at times other than Sunday worship.

If you have folks that like to hike, then I encourage you to start a hiking group. Or if you know of folks who like to run or jog, start a running group. Do your folks play chess, crochet, or love to tango? Then start those groups. Invite folks to experience those activities in community and in the presence of Jesus. As Jesus says in Mathew 18, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." This is surely as true in the middle of the forest as it is in the sanctuary!

Walking with God in the Valleys of Life

by Karen and Jim Chonister

Karen:

I started school before Bible reading was banned in schools. I remember reciting Psalm 23 as part of our morning routine, along with the national anthem and the Pledge of Allegiance. It didn't mean much to me at the time, but over my lifetime it has become precious. That lifetime has been filled with both mountaintop experiences and deep valleys. My Shepherd has been walking by my side every step of the way.

Some of the valleys my husband, Jim, and I have experienced include financial crises, health issues, professional challenges, and losing parents, siblings and friends. The deepest valley, by far, is the loss of both of our children within three years. Our son, Kirt, died in June 2021 and our daughter, Shannon, in January 2024. How does one get over that? I don't believe you ever do, but you can get through it with God's help. The process of going through it changes you, hopefully for the better (Romans 5:1-5).



To understand ourselves, we must understand the One who made us. We will never know everything about Him, this side of Heaven, but we can learn enough that we are able to put our trust in Him. As our Shepherd, God watches over us, protects us, and provides for us. First John 1:5 tells us that "He is light and in Him there is no darkness at all." He is the epitome of goodness. He can only do good and He wants good for us (Romans 8:28-29). He doesn't make bad things happen to us.

Instead of being angry at God, we need to look for the blessings in the midst of our trials. Philippians 4:6 teaches us not to be anxious but to pray with thanksgiving. I have learned to look for blessings and write them down in a journal to revisit on difficult days; sometimes those pages have tears on them. In that journal I wrote that I was thankful for the 50 years, 3 months and one day I had my son and the 46 years and 11 months with my daughter. I wrote that I was grateful they were relieved from their suffering and were in the presence of Jesus and the family members who preceded them in death.

Another comfort is that we, like sheep, recognize our Shepherd's voice as He speaks to us through His Word. We should be in His Word daily: reading it, studying it, singing it, and praying it back to God. One of my favorite portions of scripture is Psalm 139. It has been very comforting to me, and I read it over and over. It speaks of the sovereignty of God: verses 1-6 tell of His omniscience, verses 7-12 of His omnipresence, verses 13-18 of His power in making each of us, and verses 19-24 of His holiness. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He made each of us according to His plans and in those plans was included the number of our days. God had a plan for each of my children. He knew when and how they would leave this world and pass through the gates of Heaven. Accepting that it was all part of God's plan is far better than obsessing on the big WHY.

A final comfort is knowing that God loves us. He loved us so much that He sent His son to die on the cross for us. He wants us to serve Him daily, not out of duty, but out of love. We are told to love one another, encourage and comfort each other, and tell others about Him. We deeply appreciate the love and support that we have received from friends, family, and the churches we have served. Jim and I grieve differently, but we have walked through this valley together and allowed each other to grieve in their own way. We have each returned to our respective ministries: Jim as interim pastor at Donnels Creek and me to Biblical counseling and teaching. We find that fulfilling God's purpose for our lives and helping others takes the focus off our own problems and is helping us to heal.

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Calm in the Midst of Chaos

by Tara Hornbacker

What spiritual disciplines might we practice in the midst of chaos? It might take a combination of practices for us to enter a poised sense of Christ's peace in these hectic



times. Everyone is different in what works to regain some spiritual footing, but I find that I need to unplug and enter a combination of silence, contemplative prayer and community.

Silence is necessary for me to tame the “monkey-mind” (swinging from branch to branch on the unsteady limbs of trying times) that so often accompanies a sense of chaos. Entering the quiet of God's presence helps me to calm the anxieties of pressures,

from interior or exterior causes. Silence gives me space to find my way to centeredness essential for clarity of thought and purpose before God.

Silence paves the way to a time of **contemplative prayer** that is scripture soaked. Moving from silence to contemplation, allows us to abide in Christ rather than make our home in the hectic. When we pray our way through scripture that speaks of God's presence and Christ's love, we can imagine a sea that is stilled and the storms that are calmed. We might allow our souls to be shaped by the healing touch of compassion rather than the incessant slap of the latest headlines or current events. I am not advocating ignoring the world for a kind of head-in-the-sand spirituality; just not giving

chaos the authority in our lives rather than Christ.

Community is a practice that invites humble surrender to one another in honest interdependence to discern the next faithful step in unsure times. The Christian spiritual practice of community is centered in the “one-anothering” of God's love. As a spiritual discipline, community can release us from our self-obsessed, self-centered, or self-serving ways we are tempted to follow in tumultuous times.

Find a path with your own combination of spiritual disciplines leading from turbulence to tranquility – from chaos to quiet. And may the peace of Christ reign in our hearts and minds, Amen.

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Jim:

When I heard those fateful words, “she is gone,” I sat stunned and without words. Karen and I were at another doctor appointment. When we saw our son-in-law's name on the caller ID, we knew something was wrong. Nothing prepares you for that kind of news! My first thought was that I was a father with no living children. That reality filled my mind and heart for days on end. The loss of our second child compounded the loss of our first; a generation had evaporated.

All I recall was God saying to me one word, or name, “Job.” He was directing me to that source for my ultimate question of “why?” Through my study of this book, it became clear there will never be an answer, only the call to experience the providence of God. Humans naturally want answers, but God offers a relationship of trust. Faith must rest upon a Being worthy of such trust. Job's supposed friends wanted to explain how, or why. When God does show up it is with the reality of His Almighty creative ability. Karen and I focus more on gratitude and blessing and less on “why us!” We serve a loving God who promises to journey with us. Job was a different man after his suffering, and so is anyone who seeks the comfort of God rather than be stuck on their questions or issues. That allows us to say along with the songwriter, “It is well with my soul.”

A Collage of Thoughts on Prayerful Practices

Excerpted from a conversation amongst the women of Lower Miami CoB

How do we practice prayer, meditation, and reaching out to God in challenging times? The women of the Lower Miami Church of the Brethren shared their thoughts during one of their Women's Group meetings. Maybe one or more of these thoughts will open or reopen a way for you.

"Nighttime waking times are good times for quiet. Wakefulness often comes from the difficulty of stopping our brains and worrying about getting things done. I have some discipline at these times to start a list of 'God bless _____,' beginning with the individuals in my family and moving on to other people. I find that soothing and peaceful."

"Music helps me be most worshipful. I go to YouTube for the old hymns that I miss. Repeating sung Taize prayers combines my need for music with peace. In the black churches 'back in the day,' someone would start a line hymn and we would sing on and on."

"Journaling is one of my practices. My journals are conversations with God even when they are only a list of what is going on or what the day's plans are. When I was younger, I put more words to my wonderings and prayers to God. Now it's just knowing that all this is in God's hands and it's an often unwritten or unspoken ask for the Spirit of Love to lead me."

"I am a morning person. Even in retirement, very early morning is my time. Before I get out of bed, I have a little talk with Jesus. In the old saying, 'Before I put my feet on the floor, I offer up praise and thanks for another day.'"

"I picked up knitting again at a women's retreat at Woodland Altars. I have found peace when I pick up the needles and yarn. As a stranger in a strange land when I was in Germany, we knitted in groups. Quilting in a group can also be a meditative time of sharing and fellowship."

"I have a practice of yoga, being on the mat for a designated period of time and following either the words of an instructor or listening to my body, bringing my focus back to what I need for healing or greater wholeness in that moment, giving myself permission to focus inwardly instead of following someone else's agenda and timeline. The combination of music and movement within secure boundaries leads to the feeling of wholeness."

"When I get up the first thing I do is get down on my knees and thank God for another day. I end my prayer with the Lord's Prayer, which includes, 'Give us our daily bread.' It assures me that whatever happens is what is supposed to happen today. Then I sit in a chair and look out the window and meditate. Some days, I put on a gospel CD and sing along. After two hours of quiet, I am ready for my day."

"After washing my hands (for whatever reason throughout the day), I will often make the sign of the cross on my forehead with one of my wet fingers. The cool, water contact immediately grounds the unsettled energy in my body, and I am reminded to breathe deeply, and know myself as loved by God and capable of handling whatever stress is distracting me."

Together

Together is a bi-annual publication of the Southern Ohio/Kentucky District Church of the Brethren. Thank you to all who have contributed to this publication. Submissions of original artwork, poetry, as well as stories of ways we work together, or ways your church fulfills our mission of being Jesus' hands and feet in your community are always welcome. All submissions are subject to approval and editing by the Together editorial staff. Authors of original articles will be given the opportunity to preview before an article is published.

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