

## **Conversations with Luisa**

Psalm 23

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Good morning, Luisa. I want to talk to you for the next 15 minutes. Congregation, you are certainly welcomed to listen in, but Luisa and I are going to chat for a while.

I am so happy you came. We both share forms of the same name. That is very unusual, so already we have a connection.

I want to talk to you about the 23rd Psalm. It's a comforting favorite of so many people. Mostly we hear it read at times of sadness – funerals, illnesses, anytime people are challenged. But you know what? The poet wrote this for you, too. Every word speaks to you, our newest member. Let me help you understand it.

A poet wrote these words long ago. Sometimes we consider Jesus to be the Shepherd, but this Psalm was written long before he was even born. It may even be the basis of Jesus being called the Good Shepherd. The poet described our relationship to God using the imagery of a shepherd, since almost everyone at that time clearly understood what shepherds do. And Luisa, don't think for a minute that shepherds are only boys. The Bible talks about very skilled girl shepherds too – Rachel and Zipporah are two of the most famous. See? The poet includes you in this prayer.

The shepherd cares for her sheep and even rescues them from time to time. By describing lush pastures and calm waters, the poet lets us know that we will always have plenty. Chaos will give way to rest and recharging just as you do every couple of hours. And that gives your parents a chance to rest and recharge, too. The shepherd hears the calls of her sheep, recognizing each one.

Luisa, you don't have just one shepherd – you've got lots of them. Your parents stepped into that role the minute you arrived. And now, all these people surrounding you, and there are many that you may not yet notice, who will be right behind your parents – loving and caring for you as a congregation.

God knows that life is not all smooth sailing. There will be challenges to everyday living. You probably have noticed some already: hunger, personal sanitation, a loud noise or just loneliness. God hears you and responds through your parents. The congregation steps in when Mom and Dad need a respite. Nursery care helps as does Sunday School. All of these and more will come to you. You may not fully comprehend the image of a shepherd to help you, but you may see images either in your books or perhaps, even in your crib.

The poet alludes to enemies in this life. The roads we travel are not always straight; in fact, most of the time we detour, get lost or just choose the longest route possible. That's OK. For it's in those times, that we may learn of injustice – to ourselves or others. What's important is that we stand up for justice when we find otherwise. Later on, Jesus also tells us that we'll face persecution from a world that does not honor love and peace. Luisa, there may even be times when you stray, when you do or say things that are not quite loving or just. One of the beauties of this Psalm, and your baptism, is that we celebrate that the Shepherd loves you even then. And that it is God's greatest desire to bring you back into the fold.

Maybe you've encountered some enemies: scary darkness, an unfamiliar sound, uncomfortable temperature, a rumbling in your tummy or unwelcomed wetness. Perhaps a dog may knock you down while enthusiastically kissing you, a height chair topples over as you reach for the last Cheerio falling to the floor or some calamity threatens to snatch your serenity. However you experience these enemies, be assured this Psalm is written for you.

God comes to you in the form of your family. You trusted the person who held you as you drew your first breath. Soon others entered your world – Mom, Dad, grandparents, aunts and uncles. All of them delighted in your entry into the world, thanking God for your safe arrival. You simply have other names for God that you cannot yet utter. But you depend on their care as we do every time we pray to our Holy Comforter.

The psalmist then describes a feast that God sets before us, even with our enemies present. God's presence is always there, whether you call God Mom, sister, aunt or Dad. So it is in nature. Let me tell you a story of a heavenly banquet with enemies at the table.

Several people in the congregation know that I collect old Christmas trees. I've been doing this for over 10 years. I build bird sanctuaries in my backyard. This year I have a stellar collection. Early on New Year's Eve, I searched the neighborhood for discarded curb-side trees. Tying three at a time to my trailer hitch, I hauled 12 trees back to my house in just two hours. The best part was it had not yet begun to snow, so getting them stacked in the backyard was easy peasy.

I make sure my feathery friends have full bird feeders and a heated water bath all winter. The birds eat, then duck under the snow-covered branches. On a sunny day, up to 50 birds flit around the yard.

But, Luisa, it's not without danger. Hawks come too. They're not interested in the seed or water. They see lunch hiding under those branches. And as nature would have it, sometimes I find a pile of little bird feathers when I clean up the sanctuary each spring. It's a natural cycle; hawks need to eat too. But just as with you and me, God is present for all of creation. We are never alone.

That sense of trust in God's presence will remain with you for life just as it has for us. We call on God when we hurt, fear or just need a lifeline to see another day. It may be illness, it may be loss of a partner, or simply our inability to find a parking spot when in an emergency. Our prayers flow daily as do yours.

We may use different languages and sometimes not: tears flow for us as they do for you; we have screamed in anger against injustice as have you. All of us have "crossed the Barbicon" (that medieval image of safely crossing the castle moat into its thick, secure walls), uttering a prayer of relief for God's delivery from injustice.

We hear your prayer as a cry that will not stop, flailing arms and legs when something unfamiliar confronts you, or your contented coo upon rescue.

Think of us all as shepherds to care and protect you when you might have chosen the wrong path. In years to come, you'll be our shepherd preaching the Christmas Story to us. You will teach us to believe the promise as you do now. And someday, you'll greet another new member as part of a congregation promising lifelong care and support.

There's another important part of this psalm: the sheep!! We have an important role to play as well. In our world today, many write off our role as sheep as the unwitting dupes of the flock, given to always losing our way and getting into trouble. Well, that happens too, but take heart. Sheep are amazingly smart animals that seek to protect their community in spite of temporarily straying from the herd.

The poet goes on to talk about an honored guest at the banquet. That would be you, Luisa. God makes sure we're all honored in the kingdom. While the anointing with oil sounds rather messy, it was an ancient sign of great honor. In fact, you just got the baptismal treatment with water minutes ago. You handled it very well. It's just a way that we honor you as the guest of the banquet. You're that important to God and all of us.

Finally, we hear about God's promise to be with us forever. "Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." Greek translations for the word "follow" understate God's intent. Goodness and mercy don't simply traipse after us – God pursues us, not relenting until we live in that goodness.

Here's the catch, Luisa. We have to trust that the divine promise is true. That's not an easy thing. We live in a world that doesn't take easily to spiritual promises. The world usually relies on what it can see, hear and taste.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm one of the first to back up scientific discovery. Your teachers will explain that later. But I also believe that God comes to us as the community of faith. You'll find that all these people rooting for you, root for others too. Some they don't even know. They'll step in when even one person is hurting. All those promises are available to me, you, your parents and all the people sitting out there in the congregation. The promises are held by people you won't even meet for decades to come.

You have to believe that God will stand with you. Some people cannot muster that thought. They're afraid to trust something they cannot directly see. I have to remind myself sometimes that I can trust the promises God makes.

For now, Little One, your parents will protect you while you learn the delights of human life: flipping over in your crib, raising yourself up on wobbly arms. You will howl with delight as you take your first step! But your people – family, friends, and congregation – will hold you safe as does the herd. They keep their young and old in the center of the pack, sacrificing the more able-bodied on the edges to take on any enemies intent on making us into lamb stew.

Luisa, you've been living in the house of the Lord since you arrived last fall. The house of the Lord is the community of faith. You moved in with the most intimate community at home; consider us, an extension of that community – a whole world of people cheering for you.

In time, the divine promise will expand to teachers, day care attendants, perhaps scouting or even your dance teacher. All the people sitting in front of you promise to take care of you as the newest member of this congregation. It is Heaven on Earth, a promise to enfold you in love and support by those who barely know your name.

We cherish your arrival and look forward to learning from you as you grow in faith. Thank God that you have come to us, Luisa! Welcome home!

## Resources

### Psalm 23

- Coogan, Michael, ed. The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Third Edition, Psalm 23. New York: Oxford Press, p. 794.
- Bible Gateway, [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) , Good News Translation and Modern English Version

### Christian Century

- Berry, Malinda Elizabeth. “Who is My Shepherd?”, dated 7/20/2018. Source: <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/who-my-shepherd-psalm-23>
- Villegas, Isaac S. “When I pray the words of Psalm 23, the “you” I address them to is God. But I hope others will overhear.”, dated 4/14/2015. Source: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-03/april-26-fourth-sunday-easter>

### Working Preacher

- Han, Jin H. Commentary on Psalm 23, dated 5/8/2022. Source: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-psalm-23-27>
- Jacobsen, Rolf. Commentary on Psalm 23, dated 3/19/2023 (earlier post 3/20/2014). Source: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-psalm-23-28#>
- Koester, Nancy. Commentary on Psalm 23, dated 10/11/2020. Source: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-psalm-23>
- Mead, James K. Commentary on Psalm 23, dated 7/18/2021. Source: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-psalm-23-26>