

Green pastures, valleys and banquets

Quietenng ourselves

Find a quiet place in the top garden to sit.

Choose some of the words below and rest in them for a few minutes in silence. Letting go, for the moment, of things that worry you.

- ★ Abide
- ★ Still Waters
- ★ Restores my soul
- ★ Extravagant

Explanation

Today we will be using parts of the Ignatian Examen and the 23rd Psalm, to process this last year. We won't use all the parts, so forgive me for leaving out any favourites.

This example of the Examen prayer is taken from;



<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>

Slowly read Psalm 23, and savour the words. This may bring up memories of times you have read it in the past. Over the time we will read it again from several translations.

The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.

3 He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
Forever.

(New King James Version)

Review the year with gratitude

Look at the 2 lines

He makes me lie down in green pastures,

He leads me beside quiet waters,

The psalmist is confident God will provide for him at all times, just what he needs.

I wonder, how has God provided for you in the last year? What tasty green pastures has he led you to?

What has sustained you; physically, mentally and spiritually?

How has he taken you to quiet waters and kept 'restoring your soul'?

Walk down the steps towards the labyrinth and then take a right at the big gate and go across the field. As you walk through the green pastures, think about these questions.



Go through the gate at the end of the field into the wood. Follow the path down to the Hermitage. At the Hermitage, if you are able, write down or count on your fingers, all the things that have been provided



this last year. If you want to do something creative perhaps make a mindmap, collage, poem or drawing of all the things you are grateful for.



I encourage you to take some time to be grateful for how you have got through this last year, and to relish the green pastures and quiet waters that have been provided. They are God's gifts to you, as She loves you.

Once you have finished at the Hermitage, walk along the path through the wood. Stop at The Dell. If you have stepped over the stream you have gone too far.

Pay attention to your emotions from the year

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

We can be grateful for how we have gotten through this last year, but it has been very difficult for many people. For the first time in decades many of us can truly say it has been like living in the *valley of the shadow of death*. We understand that perhaps the Shepherd took the sheep through the valleys, in order to get to



the rich mountain top pastures. But this doesn't make the valleys any easier to walk through. They are still difficult and hard to comprehend.

Take some time to acknowledge the valleys and losses you have experienced, to mourn for a time. These losses are real and personal and not always understandable, even in hindsight.

Offer these to God and honestly talk/shout/cry to Her about them. Tell God how you feel, about the pain and hurt these valleys have brought. Just as the Psalmist did 'Why Lord, do you stand far off?' 'How long Lord, will you forget me forever?'. There may be feelings of anger, disappointment, sadness, or guilt. Serene Jones in the 'On Being' podcast, recommends that mourning can help transfer our grief into grace. *"It helps us let go of the blankets of fear and rage and shame. Letting go is a profound description of what forgiveness is. And that's the moment one moves from grief into the transformative power of mourning."*

In **The Dell** find something to symbolically bury, and mark with flowers or leaves. Doing something symbolic can help us to deal with emotions we don't always understand. This is about the heart as well as the head. After you have shared your losses and grief, take time to sit with them and listen for any small voices that may come to you.

23 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
Forever.
(English Standard Version)



Continue walking along the path, over the stream and to the Labyrinth.

Look toward to tomorrow

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

I find this a strange verse and I'm not entirely sure what it means. Here is one interpretation. Perhaps in those days leaders of armies would serve up a big meal the day before a battle. An extravagant meal showed both sides of the army what confidence the leader had in winning that battle. In using up all their supplies for a slap-up meal, he was saying "this will be our last battle, because today, we are going to Win!".

Whatever the meaning, the psalmist knows that trouble will continue (he has many enemies, some of them from within) but he trusts that God will continue to provide for him. And not only provide, but sometimes abundantly, luxuriously, in a banquet style.

(A little 'Thy Kingdom Come' aside.

This pentecost we are in the same position. We live in a difficult time in history, with struggles all around us. Yet we have a power to call on, like no other. The Spirit of God, giving us energy to keep going; to comfort those who mourn, help the blind see and heal the broken hearted.

In crying out for Thy Kingdom to Come, we have a tension to hold. Lots of things that are not black and white, but are 'Both / And', to quote Richard Rohr. Somehow we try to hold the mystery of the now and not yet, living very much in the kingdom where God reigns, but also knowing that it is still to come. We are triumphant, yet still in battle; looking to the mountain, walking through the valley; beside death, whilst not in fear; eating a delicious banquet, while our enemies salivate next to us. These are the mysteries we hold.)

Whilst here, think about what or who are your enemies; the struggles, fears and anxieties you know are near in the next few months?

Now imagine the banquet you might enjoy in spite of them?

What hopes do you have for the coming year? What extravagant gifts might God and his Spirit have for you? A quote I read today said that Jesus has an extravagant, furious love for his kingdom, in the here and now, for you!

You may wish to use the labyrinth to think through some of the above.

Or try this Mindfulness exercise.

1. Sit still in comfort and silence, with your hands open on your lap and close your eyes.
2. Imagine a bowl in your lap
3. Think about the texture, weight and feel of it
4. Now imagine the Spirit putting something in that bowl for you, a gift.
5. What might it be?
6. What does it look like?
7. How does it make you feel?
8. What do you want to say to God about it?

Read again one last time.

1-3 God, my shepherd!

I don't need a thing.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.

True to your word,



you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.

4 Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I'm not afraid
when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.

5 You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.

6 Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.
(The Message)

How was the day for you?
What surprised you?
What will you be taking away with you?

If you wish, say The Lord's Prayer.
Lastly, here is a blessing for you.

At The End Of The Year

As this year draws to its end,
We give thanks for the gifts it brought
And how they became inlaid within
Where neither time nor tide can touch
them.

The days when the veil lifted
And the soul could see delight;
When a quiver caressed the heart
In the sheer exuberance of being here.

Surprises that came awake
In forgotten corners of old fields
Where expectation seemed to have
quenched.

The slow, brooding times
When all was awkward



And the wave in the mind
Pierced every sore with salt.

The darkened days that stopped
The confidence of the dawn.

Days when beloved faces shone brighter
With light from beyond themselves;
And from the granite of some secret
sorrow
A stream of buried tears loosened.

We bless this year for all we learned,
For all we loved and lost
And for the quiet way it brought us
Nearer to our invisible destination.

By John O'Donohue