Considering the Spirit introduced by Jesus on eve of his crucifixion as Paraclete, or Advocate for the Defense. Opposite of “ha satan” which is the voice of accusation ringing all too often in our heads.

In John 10 entire chapter devoted to Jesus as a good shepherd. I like being sheep in relation to God: dialed down expectation good.

Jesus said he was sent for “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” meaning commoners [“people of the land”] who couldn’t observe Law, and thus lived under a cloud of accusation. The elites needed a scapegoat to blame for the national shame: if Israel was chosen, if they had been returned to promised land from exile, why were Romans now in charge? Couldn’t be leaders fault. Ah! until these “people of the land” got their act together God would let Rome wreak havoc as divine punishment. (After 9/11, Fallwell and company blamed abortion providers, feminists, gays-lesbians, civil rights activists like ACLU for angering God, causing 9/11.)

Paraclete, Spirit Jesus sends: for those who don’t measure up to religious expectations and are blamed for polluting the nation. Spirit defends them against accusation and is God’s personal presence with them: “I will not leave you orphans (without him they would be orphans, other leaders didn’t claim them) but I will send you another Advocate, who will be with you always”

Jesus is inhabiting the tradition of Ps. 23: The Lord is my shepherd

Review series of vivid scenes, comment. Pay attention to which scene most resonates: during time of reflection, use that...

Why this Psalm means so much to me: Glen Wilson stories.

Using translation by foremost scholar of Hebrew, Robert Alter. After KJV no one could fix translation problems it was so beloved.]
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. In grass meadows he makes me lie down, by quiet waters guides me.

Alter says Hebrew for “makes me lie down” is a specialized word for making animals lie down. A trick to getting your dog-cat to lie down, right? Asked Mark Metz how you get a cow to lie down he said, “You can’t...just make them calm & comfortable, eventually they will” Sheep just small enough to make them lie down...

Getting us to rest is a big priority for the one God among the many who commanded a day of rest every seventh day.

My life he brings back.

Alter says KJV “he restores my soul” is misleading—word is nephesh: life-breath. Bringing us back from brink of death. Julia assaulted in college, thought she was going to die. When it was over, had this overwhelming feeling: I’m alive! Plenty of trauma to process, but feeling of escaping death is powerful. You realize what an amazing gift it is to be alive. Oh that we could remember that every day upon waking: I’m alive! What a gift! Thank you.

He leads me on pathways of justice for his name’s sake.

Most English translations use “leads me in paths of righteousness” but in English capture Hebrew word: justice in sense of making things right. Focus of this justice is making things right for poor, widows, orphans, aliens, people on raw end of life.

Western justice is abstract application of law equally to everyone.

Hebrew justice: making things right for those who get shafted.

So you have dual opening image—of God leading us to rest near quiet waters (relaxation app) paired with being led to pathways of justice (forging justice for people who get raw deal)
John works with cab drivers—cab in minor fender-bender nearby town, contract with towing firm. Towed both cars 800 yards to lot: impounding. He calls next day to pick up car, will cost: $675. Other car (single mom) 800. What if person can’t pay? Better get money because it’s $30/day storage fee—if can’t pay in month $1600. After a while, towing company can auction car to get their money. If it’s not enough to recoup their fee they can sue you for it.

**Righting a wrong like not easy.** We need help: “He leads me in pathways of justice.” John objected got nowhere, called A2News (not interested) called local paper (going out of business) Got on council docket—support only from black council members who get it: after his presentation one official shrugs and says, “Yeah these guys are crooks.” John talked to me I said, “Call Steve Gray who supervises UM law students…” John on it. Wanna help? See John.

**Wasn’t fair to him, but he could absorb cost.** Doing it for justice in Hebrew sense: making things right for poor/widow/orphan/alien.

**Though I walk in the vale of death’s shadow, I fear no harm for you are with me.**

Human brain evolved to be on constant look-out for threats to avoid them. Our huge survival advantage: we picture future to run war games...constantly spinning threat scenarios. Majority of our thoughts are not for present-past, but future. And our future thoughts are mostly about running threat scenarios. As we do, trigger alarm system: Trouble sleeping? Often that.

Our brains are better at anticipating threats than anticipating good things. Even when we project correctly, we grossly under-anticipate factors that will help us if threat materializes.

I had this string of unfortunate that even my over-active brain didn’t anticipate. In a 2-year span: Over a 2-year period, I broke ankle, got pneumonia, wife had a horrible fall (ambulance/ER/ home WC/surgery) 2 month later, died suddenly, at just time I was headed into LGBT controversy, which slowly erupted, lost my standing
denomination, had unexpected people turn against me, lost church I founded. And that’s just an outline of the lowlights.

Worse than brain could have anticipated. But if it had, I wouldn’t all the good that came in-through-with all trauma: love of kids, sitting at church with Lisa & Lisa, pretending I wasn’t crying in worship and I think it was Lisa...no, it was Lisa...either one of them would put a hand on my shoulder and let me know I wasn’t alone. You know in old days in a blue-collar job site, little truck with coffee and donuts and sandwiches would pull up? They were me comfort truck. Wouldn’t have anticipated all of you here—joy of working w/Emily, Cassie, Penny, Caroline, Diane

From a brain activity perspective, constantly walking in the vale of death’s shadow. Notice it doesn’t say “I fear no harm because no harm will happen” but “I fear no harm because you are with me.”

Thankfully most bad scenarios we imagine don’t come to pass. No way life can keep up with all bad scenarios we imagine.

But enough happens. After Julia’s assault she went thru a long for her period of depression. Felt like she was at bottom of deep dark hole. Somewhere in there came to realize: God was in that hole with her. When she told me this she stressed: didn’t make it any less dark; didn’t give me a happy feeling in depression. She just knew God was in the hole with her.

All of that reality is packed in this one line: Though I walk in the vale of death’s shadow, I fear no harm for you are with me.

Up to this point in the Psalm God is referred to in third person: The Lord, he makes me lie down, he guides me...

But now in the vale of death shadow, I fear no harm...it shifts: for you are with me. Addressing God directly (personal presence)

Then it’s all direct from here; you, you, you...
Your rod and your staff, it is they that console me.

Shepherds have two pieces of gear: a rod and a staff. The rod is a short stick (ade of a sapling). For consoling, not whacking sheep. Things like parting long thick wool coat looking for burrs to remove. Shepherd throw rod at prey animals threatening sheep. A sheep wandering too far to right? They throw it just to right of the sheep—whizzes past and they veer left.

Staff is longer, taller than shepherd, with crook at end. Made expressly for sheep. When ewes (baby sheep city-folk) they wander from exhausted mother. If shepherd picks up baby sheep to return it to mom, smell of the human on sheep could cause mother to reject baby sheep. So shepherd uses that crook end of the long staff to pick up the baby sheep return it to mom. You can all join me in saying...AWWW

You set out a table before me in the face of my foes, You moisten my head with oil, my cup overflows.

So many depictions in Hebrew Scriptures and throughout history of the Jewish people surrounded by foes—surrounded by Egyptian masters in Goshen, their Egyptian ghetto, surrounded by Assyrian armies, Babylonian armies, later surrounded by Roman armies, not so long ago herded into ghettos in Europe and surrounded.

Jesus of course was a Jew, a devout Jew—worshipped in temple, attended synagogue, kept kosher, observed Sabbath (though he interpreted Sabbath commands differently than some)...and the God Jesus knew was the God who separated from the surrounding scapegoating mob (throughout history, often forming a circle around the unlucky ones)...and so Jesus in his ministry stepped out of such crowds and stood with the victims, like when he knelt down next to the woman caught in adultery while a little lynch mob was forming around her... And all of this he did in faithfulness to the God of the Hebrew Scriptures...and the Shepherd of Psalm 23, who is always separate from the crowd forming to threaten and to taunt......and in this vivid picture “sets a table in the face of my foes”—in plain sight of them.
And I don’t mean to be flip, but Robert Alter says the oil on the head (you moisten my head with oil) wasn’t anointing oil like most English translation (you anoint my head with oil)…it was olive oil worked through the hair…like I just discovered hair product, and I got me some bedhead that smells like coconut.

It’s part of one scene—setting table for us, throwing a feast, in the face of our foes who are watching us, wanting to pounce and then moistening our head with oil (working the bedhead in so we are looking our best)—because the foes are just waiting for us to look bad, are rooting against us.

Most times when people get married community is rooting for them. But sometimes couples get married and one family or the other is rooting against them—they disapprove of the marriage because the person is marrying outside their race, or outside their religion or inside their gender, or whatever. It just sucks to be in that place where you know people are rooting against you.

Hey, there’s lots of people who would be brothers and sister in faith—fellow people who want to follow Jesus—who are rooting against this church. That’s sad. That’s no fun.

Anyone in that position? This is for you: **You set out a table before me in the face of my foes, You moisten my head with oil, my cup overflows.**

God is rooting for you in the face of people rooting against you.

He’s setting a table for you in their presence, working the product that makes your hair look good into your head, oh, and he’s so for you that he comes like a waiter to your table and instead of filling your wine glass half full, he fills it to rim, and it overflows and he makes a show in front of all those rooting against you people, “Oh I’m so sorry sir/ma’am—I seem to have filled your cup too full!

[Turn to the foes for effect: I filled their cup too full!]

*Let but goodness and mercy pursue me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long days.*
You’ve had the being chased dream, right? That’s deep in the human psyche—being pursued by foes. I think this image is part of the whole business of foes.

So when Kruschev (back in the USSR days) pounded his shoe on table in UN, translator mistranslated what he said, “We will bury you!” but it was really “We will outlast you.” The goal with foes is to outlast them. If you are being pursued, run longer and farther than your foes that’s all.

Notice it’s not goodness and mercy will await me in the future (heavenly kingdom). This ain’t about no heavenly kingdom. Alter translates last line “for many long days”—that’s the Hebrew.

It’s goodness and mercy will pursue me.

Like there’s a pack of dogs pursuing us and they all eventually wear out (humans can generally outlast dogs in a run). But two of those dogs are named goodness and mercy and they will hound us for the whole livelong day.

I like that, goodness and mercy are going to outlast all the other things chasing after us.