

## **“Pocket Wisdom”**

Text: Psalm 121; Psalm 103: 1-5

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**“Don’t forget your pocket wisdom,” Mary would say, “there’s plenty enough treasure to sustain you.”**

Mary was my supervisor in a program called CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education. Just to explain: CPE is an intensive clinical program, usually in a hospital setting, in which a minister-in-training learns hands-on some of the spiritual and psychological dimensions of pastoral care. In my case, the context was Cushing Hospital just outside of Boston; the year was 1978; and I was apprentice with five others to gentle-tough Mary.

She was a Roman Catholic nun, *women religious*, as has been coined, and, as I recall, a Sister of St. Joseph. She also held two doctorates, one in pastoral counseling and the other in education. She was a rare blend of academic rigor and deep devotion; of compassion, but with no-nonsense!

Mary’s sage counsel has been with me all of the years since: “don’t forget your pocket wisdom.” She was referring literally to a pocket-sized copy of the Psalms, standard issue to those of us serving as Chaplains. But more important, she was speaking figuratively, because she knew that Psalms held close often find a deeper lodging in human hearts.

Mary also taught us that it was okay to cherry-pick from the Psalms that we carried. You know what I mean by that: picking selectively among the best and leaving the rest. (By the way, back on campus at seminary, that was absolutely forbidden at the time as subjective and sloppy practice!)

But Mary had a different perspective. “People in a hospital don’t need to hear how much you can explain about the context of a passage,” she would say, “they need to hear a genuine word of faith. They don’t care how much Hebrew or Greek you can unravel. They need to hear from the heart the promises of the ages.”

**And so it is this morning!** Though I no longer carry any such booklet in my shirt pocket, I do hold a good number of affirmations and promises in my heart. They are words I have come to believe deeply and rely on ó not only as a pastor, but as a person of faith. I find them bubbling up time and again along my own journey. Perhaps as you listen, you might cherry-pick a few Psalms of your own.

Here's one full of goodness for those moments when life's grandeur simply takes my breath away! In fact, one evening this week, the moon was so full that it lit up the sky and fell into my own sacred whisper: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! The whole universe speaks of your glory, O God most high! When I look at your heavens . . . the work of your fingers . . . the moon and the stars that you have established, who are we that you care for us?" Pocket wisdom!

Or, vastly different. Sometimes life can be full of trouble rather than sparkling with stars. And so, when I am burdened, another Psalm makes its way just as automatically: "Cast your burdens on the Lord and he will sustain you." Almost as an antidote, when I whisper those words in prayerful sigh, life becomes clearer and burdens lighter. Or when I am discouraged, I find myself asking the Psalm's question: "Why are you cast down, O my soul; and why are you disquieted within me?" I particularly appreciate that word "disquieted," and how naming my inner turmoil helps me to calm down.

Or, when joy is my story, you know my favorite: "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!" Or: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the lands, serve the Lord with gladness, come into his presence with singing!" Or, "All of the trees in the forest clap their hands and sing for joy!"

When I am feeling particularly thankful: "Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me, bless God's holy name!"

Or, when I need reassurance and comfort: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence does my help come?" Or: "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble." Or: "from everlasting to everlasting, you are God."

**Okay, I have to come clean!** I have been a bit sneaky this morning. I have been trying to back you into discovering that you probably know more of the Psalms than you think you do! I've been doing that by pausing here and there and having you fill in the missing words and phrases. And I am doing so because I suspect that without even being aware, we all carry a little bit more pocket wisdom than we know. So let me just ask three questions to shift it fully your way.

The first one puts it squarely in your lap: What are the small snips and cherries of scripture that you hold close to heart?

Second: knowing that simple practices of faith can sustain us in very large ways, would you consider enlarging the pocket wisdom that you do have, even by a single verse?

And third: Can you finish this one with me as we come to the Table of Life together? I suspect that a good many of us have already cherry-picked this one for our very own:

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 paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*  
*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*  
*I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me;*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;*  
*Thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;*  
*And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

My family and my friends, come now, the Table awaits.

Amen

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