

The Good Shepherd (2)

Pastor Ed Harkey

Psalm 23:2-4
TLC Keene, NH

“Led”

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect for Easter IV)

Introduction

[Skit Guys - “Shep” video ...]

In his devotional classic, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Phillip Keller notes that because of their make-up, it is next to impossible for sheep to be at ease, unless, four requirements are met.

First, owing to their timid nature, sheep cannot rest unless they are free from all fear. Next, because of the tension that sometimes arises from being in a flock, sheep will not rest “unless they are free from friction with others of their kind.” Third, being prone to all kinds of attacks from within or without – flies, parasites, other predators – only if sheep are freed from these are they able to dwell secure. Finally, sheep must be free from hunger (29). All told, a big part of the security that sheep feel is rooted in one critical source: the shepherd, and that shepherd’s care for his/her sheep.

Last week Rich introduced you to that Shepherd! Where, despite whatever it is we may experience in this life, Jesus truly cares for His own. Yes, child of God, I have Good News for you: Jesus, the Good Shepherd, cares for you!

HAVING ONCE BEEN A LAMB HIMSELF, THAT LAMB, NOW BECOME A SHEPHERD, WILL SEE EACH OF HIS PRECIOUS ONES SAFELY HOME!

Amen.

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So, if last week was about being “Wed” to the Savior – as a sheep to its Shepherd (23:1), and next week is about being “Fed” at that Savior’s Table (23:5), this week, as Psalm 23 moves us forward, is about being “Led” (23:2-4). Where, as I often say when studying God’s Word – “pay special attention to *who* is doing the verbs!”

Where, as we move into the heart of the Psalm, we note our Good Shepherd setting about to doing four things for His own:

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 (or right paths)
for his name's sake.*

Let’s take a moment to unpack each of those:

He makes (lit. causes) *me* (to) *lie down in green* (grassy, luscious, scrumptiously rich) *pastures*.

Where, before *we* do anything – after all we’re just helpless sheep – everything (yes everything) depends upon the Shepherd. With no means of self-defense, with no recourse but to bolt and run, everything turns – for good or ill – on our Shepherd both to lead us away, and protect us *from* fears within and without.

Child of God, what do you fear? What keeps you up at night? What causes your heart to flutter and flee? What robs you of rest?

Going through a particularly difficult time a number of years ago, I unburdened myself to one of my colleagues. He patiently listened to me, as I poured out my many worries and fears. It was a long list.

Where, when, I’d pretty much covered them all, he lovingly asked me, “Is that all?”

“Yes.” I replied.

To which he said, “You forgot one.”

“What?”

“Where is your fear of God?”

It was — as it often is — *most certainly true*. For when we are the most prone to fear, doubt, and worry, we completely lose minds. We lose our memory of our Savior’s past promises. We lose our memory of His voice: “*You shall have no other gods before me.*” Where, the *Small Catechism* explains the 1st Commandment: “We should fear, love and trust in God above all things.” Pretty simple, eh?

But we are an anxious lot, and like a presidential election, there are many candidates to cause our hearts to fear, amen? I mean, these are uncertain times. “Any hour can bring disaster, danger and distress from quarters unknown. No one can tell what a day will produce in new trouble. We live either in a sense of anxiety, fear and foreboding, or in a sense of quiet rest. Which is it?” (Keller, 31)

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, guides us. Just as with the two wearied and worrisome travelers on the road to Emmaus, our Savior not only graciously comes along side of us, but then ... He speaks His life-giving Word into our hearts and lives. His Words of comfort and grace are the lush pastures we seek. He breathes the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, into our fearful and trembling hearts.

“God has not given us the spirit of fear (St. Paul writes to Timothy); but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind, and heart.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

He grazes us on the pasture of His presence. He nourishes us on the promises of His Word. He does not drive us (Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament*, 41), but ...

He leads me beside still waters (lit. waters of refreshment).¹

Where, it is the church Father Augustine who, in his treatise *The City of God*, penned that endearing prayer:

“O God! You have made us for Yourself, and our souls are restless until they find their rest in You.”

¹ An “abstract plural” to heighten/intensify the effect of the concept (e.g. “waters of abundant refreshment”) // the Promised Land

Child of God, there is no substitute for the living water that Jesus offers to us. Yes, ours is a thirst that *only* Jesus, our Good Shepherd, can fill. Only He can truly satisfy. Only He can make “sense and purpose and meaning come out of situations which otherwise would be but a mockery to me.” (Keller, 48) Yes, what is more refreshing than to be brought back to our Baptism time and time again, reminding us that our sins are forgiven, life is restored, and salvation is assured?

“Wash your face; remember your baptism.” (Luther)

Bask and bathe often in the remembrance of who you truly are in Christ – “*a new creation*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). For what our Good Shepherd offers to us is more than just a quick “stop by the brook on a hot day.” (Bartelt, *Lectionary at Lunch*) His gifts to you and to me are good. They are ... life! Even as ...

He restores (revives, repairs) ***my soul*** (the very essence of who we are).

To be restored, revived or repaired is a “repentance” Word in the original language. It means, literally, to be brought back – brought back from sin, brought back from death, brought back from hell itself! And who best to do the bringing – “*bringing in the sheaves*,” as Psalm 126 says?

Indeed, “as a lost sheep (our) *only* hope is in the good shepherd who will come after me and find me, pick me up and carry me back to safety.” (Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament*, 45)

“Perverse and foolish oft I strayed, but yet in love He sought me, and on His shoulder gently laid, and home rejoicing, brought me.” (Baker)

(Whereby) ***He*** (will) ***lead me in*** (right) ***paths*** (tracks, well-worn ruts) ***of righteousness*** (why?) ***for his name's sake*** (as He stakes His very life and name on His willingness to come through – to lead His sheep).

To be sure, we are a fickle, fearful, and at times faithless lot, just as soon to content ourselves on that which is not bread (Isaiah 55:1-2)... to drink from the putrid, polluted, parasitic pools of this world... to chase after whatever it is that we think will get us through another day.

Isaiah had it right when he said ...

“All we, like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way.” (53:6)

What can break the chains? What, or *who*, can truly set us free?

“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ... If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ... (For) I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd.” (John 10:7, 9-11a)

Wherein ...

⁴ *Even though* (also when) *I walk through the valley* (those steep ravines) *of the shadow of death* (the valley of deep darkness),² *I will fear no evil ...*

And why not?

For you (it gets intensely personal here) *are with me* (“in every situation, in every dark trial, in every dismal disappointment, in every distressing dilemma”³); *your rod* (to protect me from external threats)⁴ *and your staff* (to gently assist and rescue me), *they* (don’t terrify me, or betray me, no they) *comfort me*.

Child of God, we still have a life to live. Where, as dark as the days may seem, Jesus has made a most solemn promise to you:

“I will neither leave you nor forsake you.” (Hebrews 13:5)

True, the steep ravines of sadness and sorrow can’t be avoided. “The only way forward is *through* the valley ... But (and this is key) the psalm does not say, ‘This valley is where the trail ends, get used to it!’” ... No! We only go through it. “To shift metaphors, the psalmist is willing to ‘cross that bridge when he comes to it,’ knowing that the bridge is intact and that it will lead to safety on the other side.” (Bailey, 48)

² A prominent description of Job’s plight (3:5, 10:21-22, 12:22, 16:16, 24:17, 28:3, 34:22, and 38:17); Here, “death has not yet come, but its shadow lurks over the faithful, creating a sense of darkness, futility, hardship, and despair.” (French, *Feasting on the Word [B]*, 2:349) // Luther’s *anfechtung*.

³ Keller, 74

⁴ Used both to count and protect the sheep (see Leviticus 27:32; 1 Samuel 17:34-35; 1 Corinthians 4:21; 2 Corinthians 11:25) (Bailey, 53)

Which is to say, our walk along the steep ravines of sorrow and sadness “need not be ‘dead end’ streets. The disappointments, the frustration, the discouragements, the dilemmas, the dark, difficult days, though they be shadowed valleys, need not be disasters.” Indeed, with Jesus, our Good Shepherd, they are “the road to higher ground in our walk with God.” (Keller, 75)

“In this world you will have trouble (Jesus once said to His own): but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Conclusion

[Albrecht Durer’s “The Knight, Death, and the Devil” – What do you see?]

How blest we are to be in the company of our true Good Shepherd, who gifts and graces us to safe places, all for His name’s sake.

Wherein, a “passionate care for the sheep, coupled with strength to protect them, is the mark of the shepherd. ... (Even when) death could well be lurking in the shadows ... even if it means the shepherd must lose his own life. ... (All to say) the abiding place of (*our*) safety is in Yahweh.” (Turner, *Feasting on the Word (B)*, 2:437)

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Amen.

[FRIDAY E-MAIL:]

“*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*” Simply hearing/reading those words, what stands out to you? One can’t help notice, first off, how God/divine centered/driven the Psalm is. From the very first word in Hebrew: YAHWEH/ *The Lord* ... to “*He makes ... He leads ... He restores*” ... shifting, then in the 2nd half of the Psalm from the 3rd to the 2nd person singular “*You are with me ... Your rod ... Your staff,*” there is no doubt as to **who** this Psalm is about. There is no doubt as to **who** is doing what, *to* and *for* whom. There is no doubt as to **who** is doing both the leading *and* the following ... with us right smack dab in the middle.

Child of God, this is exactly where we need and should long to be. Yes, this is exactly where our trust and faith in the promises of God would place us. Where, there can be no greater comfort than to know that the Lord Himself is leading us, and then, following us up (literally pursuing us) with His “*goodness and mercy.*” To know that the Lord is *leading* us means that He will never take us to places that He Himself has not already gone, or is willing to go. To know that He *follows* us with His “*goodness and mercy*” assures us that even in those times when we fear, falter or fail, He covers us and our tracks with His grace. I mean, being in the middle, we can’t lose! With Him to hem us in, before and behind, our safety is assured. We are secure. We are ... *truly* blessed!

As we prepare this Sunday for the 2nd in our series on Psalm 23, may the assurance of His presence guide and keep you today. It is no empty promise we possess, in Him who graciously possesses us. Carried out to its fullest extent, His promise to be with us extends all the way to the Cross, through the empty tomb, and to Jesus’ ascension where He made this promise to His disciples, “*I will be with you to the very end of the age*” ... leaving both His Word and His sacraments as visible signs to us ... throughout the entire course of our lives.

Child of God, cling, as do I, to this promise. Cling to your Savior. He is that sure guide through this conflicted and crazy world. His “right paths” that you and I walk by faith, lead only to one place ... straight to Him and His provision ... graciously with us at the beginning ... the middle ... *and* the end! SYOS