

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 9, 2018
Based on Isaiah 40:10–11; John 10:11–15; Hebrews 13:20–21***

Today is the beginning of a fall sermon series on the twenty-third Psalm, entitled “Beside Still Waters.” Out of 150 psalms, Psalm 23 is a universal favorite, and it ranks as one of the most well-known passages in the entire Bible. Perhaps it is so well known that at times when we hear it the words slide right past us. Yet there are other times, especially when we are facing some difficulty or anxiety, when we may hear the psalm and find that its words speak deeply to the soul. The Psalm is especially used at funerals; but in fact it has a powerful message for our entire life, and there is good reason that it is a favorite, because there is enormous meaning packed into these few verses. So we begin today what I believe will be a very rewarding journey, as we travel through the twenty-third Psalm. We start with the first half of verse one—“The Lord is my shepherd.” {prayer}

In the Hebrew Scriptures, prior to verse one, there is a line that states that this is a Psalm of David. We will see in this sermon series how King David's story lies behind much of this psalm; and this is part of what gives the psalm its power, because David was a person who had great faith but who also made great errors and hit great troubles. Psalm 23 is not a nice little poem written by someone sitting off in an ivory tower. The words of this psalm are the words of someone who wrestled with life and faith—who experienced the depths of personal failure and loss, but who also experienced the great power and gracious love of God.

After the identification of the psalm as a Psalm of David, verse one begins with a poignant image: The Lord is my shepherd. Outside of an obscure reference in a blessing of Jacob, this is the earliest place in the Bible—a verse written around 1000 B.C.—where God is prominently pictured as a shepherd; but the image would reappear at many later points. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “The Lord will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms” (Isaiah 40:11); and the prophet Jeremiah would say, “The Lord will keep His people as a shepherd keeps the flock.” (Jeremiah 30:10)

It may seem pleasant to think of God as our shepherd; but on the other hand, there is also something challenging about this image. If God is our shepherd, then what does that make us? Sheep! And quite honestly, we are not inclined to think of ourselves as sheep. Sheep are dumb, they are stubborn, they are easily frightened, they run in herds, they get lost, and they are dependent and often helpless. If you ask people to pick an animal that they would like to have as a symbol for themselves (such as for a team mascot), they will likely pick something like a lion or a bear or a tiger or an eagle. We want to be in charge and powerful! In fact, the lion and the bear and the tiger and the eagle are all actual team mascots for numerous teams, and they are all national symbols of various countries. But there are no sports teams that want to be sheep, with the exception of a few teams who have a ram for a

mascot, which is normally a bighorn sheep, where the ram is a formidable figure. Ordinary sheep don't make the grade.

But if we are truly honest with ourselves, we likely discover that there are some real parallels between sheep and our human condition. As human beings, we are often stubborn. We are easily frightened. We run in herds. We lose our way. We get in trouble. As Isaiah put it, "All we like sheep have gone astray." [Isaiah 53:6] To recognize that we are like sheep and that God is our Shepherd is to come finally to a key spiritual insight: we need God. We are not self-sufficient and all-powerful. We need a Shepherd.

In this context, it is quite striking that David, of all people, acclaimed God as his shepherd. David was the greatest king in the history of Israel. He defeated one foe after another and pushed the borders of his country to their greatest extent. As king, he was considered to be the "shepherd" for the rest of the nation. He could easily have fallen into the illusion that he was all-powerful and self-sufficient. But at the outset of Psalm 23, David recognized that he himself was not the shepherd. The Lord is the shepherd. David recognized his need for God.

The Psalm at its beginning would move us to that same recognition. With the sheep image the Psalm makes us aware that we are limited creatures who on our own will be lost; but with the shepherd image the Psalm brings forth several key truths about God.

What does a shepherd do for sheep? A shepherd, first of all, *cares* for the sheep. A good shepherd is concerned for the well-being of each sheep, and works to see that the sheep have their needs met. This caring aspect of the shepherd is accented by the prophet Isaiah, when he says that God as shepherd "will feed his flock" and "will gather the lambs in his arms." (Isaiah 40:11) A shepherd also provides *guidance* for the sheep, leading them in the right paths to good pastures and watering places, images that will come out in later verses in Psalm 23. Furthermore, a shepherd provides *protection* for the sheep, defending them against predators and dangers of all sorts. To say that God is our shepherd is to say therefore that God will care for us and will guide us and will protect us. It is to say that there can be a very close and sustaining relationship between ourselves and God. God is not some distant deity; but God is near, to be actively engaged in our lives—just as a shepherd is close to the sheep.

Right here there is another key element in the first phrase of the twenty-third Psalm. David says not simply, "The Lord is *a* shepherd." He says "The Lord is *my* shepherd." Here is a key juncture for each one of us—when God is not simply a concept out there, but when God becomes *our* shepherd, to lead us and sustain us in our personal life.

At the same time, even as the twenty-third Psalm encourages a direct personal relationship with God, it does not encourage *private* religion. Today there is a good deal of confusion in this regard. Many people want to think that they don't need any connection with a church—they don't need a faith community. They can just have their own private thing with God. But while Biblical faith is personal, it is not private. Consider again the shepherd

image. How many shepherds have one sheep? Shepherds have flocks of sheep. The whole image of the shepherd creates the sense that God is leading us not in a solitary spiritual venture but in company with others. This in fact is what we see throughout the Bible—whether we are looking at the people of Israel in the Old Testament or the twelve disciples or the early church—we see that people grow in a relationship with God as they share in a community of faith with one another. This is why we are drawn by God into connection with the church today. If we want to share in the kind of experience that David describes in the twenty-third Psalm, we need not only to be led by the shepherd but to be joined with the shepherd's flock.

The image of God as shepherd continues throughout the Old Testament and comes finally to a complete fulfillment in the New Testament in Jesus. As we heard in our gospel reading from John, Jesus said "I am the good shepherd." (John 10:11) In Jesus we see in full measure how God will care for us and will guide us and will save us finally even from death, and we see how Jesus draws into fellowship with one another. During this sermon series, we will discover many ways in which the themes of the twenty-third Psalm find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus.

One of the most significant references to Jesus as shepherd occurs at the end of the letter to the Hebrews. The letter of Hebrews was addressed to a group of Christians who were dealing with considerable pressure and suffering in the midst of very challenging times. The letter concludes with a benediction which was intended to bring to them a message of great hope. It is the longest benediction in the Bible, as it was designed to lift up all the central aspects of what Jesus does. It declares, "Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good, that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever." (Hebrews 13:20-21)

You will note that this benediction refers to the *crucifixion*, as it speaks of "the blood of the eternal covenant." It refers to the *resurrection*, as it speaks of God "bringing again from the dead our Lord Jesus." It refers to the *exaltation* of Jesus in glory, in its closing words. And it refers to the *ongoing working* of Christ within us, to enable us to grow in God's grace according to God's purpose, as it speaks of our "being made complete in everything good." Then it has one other phrase which describes who Jesus is for us. The image it lifts up is that Jesus is "the great shepherd of the sheep." Of all the possible ways to describe Jesus, why does the letter of Hebrews use this picture? It is because just as the image of shepherd in the Old Testament is a central image for God, so now this image encapsulates who Jesus is—one who watches over us, who seeks after us, who calls us to come to him, and who is so devoted to us that he offers his life for us; as Jesus said, "I lay down my life for the sheep." (John 10:15)

Three thousand years ago, King David found enormous encouragement in realizing that the Lord is our shepherd. Today, in the midst of challenging times, we likewise can find

real hope as we look to Jesus, “the good shepherd”; and we know that we are in the care, the mercy, and the everlasting providence of the Lord.