

1 Good Shepherd – Psalm 23

David calls the Lord God his Shepherd. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the Lord God. He has searched for his lost sheep. All of us, like sheep, have gone astray. We all deserve to be burned on the altar just like the sheep who were sacrificed at the temple. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Lord God of all, set his own life on the altar of the cross. The Shepherd, who has every right to sacrifice his sheep, sacrifices himself. By giving himself for the sheep, Jesus has satisfied the righteous anger of God. He has set God at peace with sinners. And because God is satisfied, because God is at peace, it follows that we can be at peace. He satisfies us with the assurance that our sins are forgiven and we have been reconciled to God. This is why David declares: “The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want.” In other words, “I don’t need anything else, because I am at peace with God. My Lord has laid his life down for me, taking my place as the sacrifice on the altar of the cross. So if God is satisfied, then I’m satisfied. If he did not spare his own Son but gave him up for me to save me, then I am confident that he will give me all good things.”

As our Shepherd, Jesus laid his life down for the sheep. But he doesn’t stop here. He also leads us. Not only did he take away our sins and seal our peace with God, but he also continues to lead us. As David sings, “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.” These green pastures are his Word and sacraments. His sheep hear his voice. And it is only when they hear his voice when they are at peace. When the storms and waves of temptations to sin seek to overwhelm us, it is his call that continues to give us rest. He who said to the stormy sea, “Be still” is the same one who says, “Come to me all you who are laboring and carrying a heavy load, and I will give you rest.”

The words of Jesus are not just like any soothing words. They are true and eternal words. They are words that have been tried and tested in the fire of the cross, proven true in the glory of his resurrection. It is a familiar voice you have learned to trust. But why? Why do you trust this voice of Jesus? Is it because it reminds you of safer times when you were a child? Is it soothing and comforting like the smell of mom’s home cooking or like dad’s outdoor grilling? His voice is much more than this. His voice has converted you. His Word has given you faith. His words declare you righteous for the sake of what he has done in your place. And his words continue to lead you in this righteousness. So David sings, “He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

Now consider what David says here. He restores your soul. You, who were lost and dead in your sins, unable to turn to him, unable to seek him, were converted. He restored you, converted you, turned you. And he didn’t just do this to your body. He didn’t just leave you some rules to follow and give you some good habits. No, he converted your soul. He who gave his life up for you claimed your very life as his own. He has clothed you in his own righteousness. And now he continues to lead you. He stays with you through his Word, teaching you to do what he restored you to do, teaching you to live in love toward God and your neighbor, and continuing to forgive and restore you whenever you stumble or fall. He suffered for us. And he continues to guide us as we walk in his shoes. We look to his example not only as a model for how we are to live, but still as a continual reminder of what he has done to restore us and save us.

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Yes, he remains with you. This is why he instituted the sacrament of his body and blood. He promises that as we gather around his gospel and sacraments, he is with us always even to the end of the age. And he remains with you even during temptations. Even when you find in yourself nothing but darkness and despair, he is with you. This is what his name, Immanuel, means. He is GOD WITH US. David sings, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

What is this shadow of death? Of course, it is when you are finally facing your own death, when the pain is overwhelming, when your eyes are closed and your mind is fading. But this dark valley surrounds us many other times in our life. When a dark cloud hovers over you, when you can't resist grief and sadness, he is with you. When you lose a companion, a child, a spouse, or a friend to death; or worse, when you lose a companion, a child, a spouse, or a friend because of sin; when you are overtaken by guilt; when people insult you and lie about you; when those whom you considered as trustworthy and sure have abandoned you and betrayed you; when the world mocks you for believing in the voice of your Good Shepherd, he is with you. He endured all these things, including your own sin. And he comforts you. With his rod he wards off the wolves who try to tear your faith out of your heart, and with his staff he continues to guide you into the green pastures of his Word of peace.

Years ago I was going over funeral plans with the children of a parishioner who had just died. As I showed them our Gospel lesson for today from John chapter 10, one of the children, who was not a church goer anymore, did not like this reading. She thought it was too dark and depressing for a funeral service. I was amazed to hear this. What can be more comforting for a Christian funeral than the message that Jesus is our Good Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep? What can be more comforting than knowing that we, his sheep, listen to his voice and are saved by his Word? But as I read through the passage again, it became clear why she thought the way she did. This text talks about those who break in and steal. It talks about wolves attacking and scattering the sheep and about those who don't own the sheep running away and leaving the sheep to be easy prey. This was depressing to her.

But this warning is not depressing to Christ's sheep. We know from listening to our Shepherd's voice that we are surrounded by danger, temptations, and all kinds of spiritual enemies all around. We know that the thoughts of the world rage against the will of God, that the devil constantly lies about God's Word, and that our own sinful passions make war against our souls. Christ our Lord has warned us of these things. But we don't need to be afraid. In fact, we should find comfort in the fact that our Good Shepherd is true and honest with us. He's straight with us about the dangers of false teachers and temptations. And he is faithful to save us from these enemies. He continues to give us his Word, protecting us from sin and every evil. He sets his table before us, giving us his body to eat and his blood to drink, strengthening us with the confidence to confess his name before the world and not be put to shame. So David sings, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.”

We don't need to despair over the fact that we are surrounded by so many false teachings in this world. We don't need to lose hope in the face of all the temptations of this life. Yes, we should be warned against these things. Those who promote sexual sins of every kind, those who mutilate children, who promote the murder of the unborn, take their neighbor's money by

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a show of right, teach people to worship God in their own way and not through faith in the words of Christ – these are enemies, fierce enemies, whom the devil uses to lead the sheep astray. But the table Christ has set before us cannot be torn down. His body and blood will continue to nurture us who find our only rest and peace in his living voice. And no matter how much the devil says that he wants you, remember that Jesus has anointed you to be his own. You have been baptized, sealed through faith by the Holy Spirit who intercedes for you with groanings that are too deep for words.

If you have been baptized into Christ, if you have his body and blood continually given to you as a sure token of his favor, if you have his pure Word continually proclaimed among you, then you couldn't possibly ask for anything more. Your cup overflows with the assurance that God is with you and on your side. As David sings, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

This Psalm of David ends with as much confidence as how it began. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. How can you be so sure? What if the money runs out? What if your health fails? What if the sheep keep getting scattered and false teachers keep teaching falsely? The confidence of faith cannot be shaken by these things, because it relies on the voice of the Good Shepherd. He promises that there will be one flock and one Shepherd. There will remain one church forever, the sheep who hear the voice of their Good Shepherd. He who laid his life down and took it up again is good on his promise. Amen.