

“The Good Shepherd”

May 11, 2025

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Psalm 23: 1-6

Today I want us to take a little journey through the 23rd Psalm together. But I don't want you to just hear my words. I want you to remember those stories from our Lenten Meditations – meditations that claimed Psalm 23 as their backdrop. Meditations and stories of how those who shared stayed on the path and kept following Jesus even: when the path suddenly goes uphill, when there is a moment to pause to take in the beauty, when you lost my walking partner, when you are floating on a Spiritual high, when you have to adjust your stride according to who walking with, when the path disappears and you didn't know which way to go. Remember those stories through this message.

James Limburg pointed out that if you go to the original Hebrew form of Psalm 23, and count in exactly 26 words from the beginning and 26 words from the end, what you have left is “Thou art with me”. Which means mathematically as well as thematically, Psalm 23 centers on “Thou art with me. It is the meaning of Jesus' name Emmanuel as well as the miracle of Christmas – God with us. But with the image of the shepherd, the Psalm takes it a step further. God is not only with us, God is leading us. And we like the way the journey begins. “He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul.” God knows those places. God knows we need those places. And God leads us to them. But they are just temporary. We were not created and called by God to just sit around and eat ice cream. We are created on purpose, for a purpose. And the next line says, “He leads me in right paths for His name's sake.” Life is not a free-for-all where we get to do whatever we want and “it's all good, bro.” There are right paths and there are wrong paths. The right ones revolve around being a gift to God and each other. The wrong paths focus on oneself, pretending the whole world is like me and exists to serve my needs and fulfil my selfish desires. Ironically those paths that look like they are serving you, really destroy you. And the paths that look like you are pouring yourself out for others, are the paths that form you, bolster you, and connect you with power way beyond you. Follow the good shepherd, for He knows the right paths.

But even when we are doing our best to follow the right paths, we come to the valley. Our new Bibles translate it “Even though I walk through the darkest valley.” Many of us memorized, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” Scholars say “the darkest valley” is a more accurate translation because some of our darkest valleys, like clinical depression and relational abuse, make death sound inviting. But either way it is the darkest valley where death seems to be walking with us. But the shepherd is still with us, too. In the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus proclaims “I am the good shepherd”, and I really appreciate that here. Because who else would you rather follow through the darkest valley –

the valley of the shadows of death? Jesus has been there before. And Jesus made a way through the valley to life on the other end. Others may think they know how to get through it or even avoid it, but Jesus has been there and come out the other side. That is the One I want to follow. And because Jesus has been there before, “I fear no evil, for You are with me.”

And how does this good Shepherd lead us? “Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” Apparently, shepherds in the time carried a rod and staff. The rod was a fairly short, thicker piece of wood resembling a club. This was the weapon. The shepherd used it to smash coiled snakes, defend against coyotes, and even throw at predators to keep them at a distance. The staff was a longer, more slender piece of wood with a hook on the end. This tool was for the sheep. The shepherd could gently tap a sheep to get its attention or redirect its path. The hook could be used in extreme cases to pull a drowning sheep from the river or insist that a stubborn lamb change direction. The shepherd’s rod and staff – one for beating down predators to keep them away, and one for directing and lifting up the sheep to keep them near – they comfort me.

One of the Bible commentaries I read was very excited to explain that unlike cattle who like to be driven from behind, sheep prefer to be led. Sheep can actually form a trusting relationship with their shepherd. That means sometimes the shepherd walks ahead of them and gives the sheep room to spread out. Sometimes the shepherd walks slightly behind them or even in the middle of them in order to keep them close, using the shepherd’s staff to tap and guide. This is especially done in areas of danger or multiple distractions. Sometimes the shepherd walks in front of the sheep, but walks backwards in order to lead the sheep while still keeping a close eye on them. Apparently in the Middle East today you can still see shepherds leading their sheep. And even if multiple flocks arrive at the watering hole at the same time and the sheep get mixed in together, nobody stresses, because when it is time to go, the shepherd gives his own distinctive whistle, call or tune on their shepherd’s flute, and all that shepherd’s sheep separate from the others and follow the shepherd they have learned to trust. Do you know Jesus’ whistle, call and tune? In John 10: 27, Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” It is our job to learn the voice of our shepherd and follow it where He leads us. He doesn’t drive us or scare us or threaten us. He leads us. I love the image of God going before us.

The journey of this life takes us to green pastures, still waters, dark valleys, and even into the presence of our enemies. The 23rd Psalm is honest about this. Life has beautiful moments, calm moments, moments of recuperation and incredible joy. Life also has dark moments, painful moments, moments of fear and worry. And in this life, we will develop enemies. Some of them will be people who see things differently or want the same things we do and challenge us for them. Some of those enemies are not as easy to point to and touch, but are just as real: fear, anxiety, loneliness, disabilities, perceived disabilities, the unknown. We have enemies. And our

holy shepherd doesn't leave us here either. The idea of gathering at a feast before our enemies is a picture of God's abundance coming to us while our enemies can still see us – see our blessing, see our feast, see our victory.

And just as Psalm 23 is honest about the dark valleys and the enemies, it is honest about how our story ends. If you follow and respond to the shepherd, the journey brings you home. Jesus the Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep and made a way to God's eternal home. "For My house has many rooms," says Jesus. "If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

The truth is, everyone needs a shepherd. I hope that your mom was a good one for you. But I hope even more, that you have and will continue to learn the voice of Jesus, learn the still small voice of God within, and trust it, respond to it, follow it. Everyone needs a shepherd, and I thank God for sending us Jesus that we may follow Him to the green pastures, beside the still waters, along the right paths, through the darkest valley, beyond the enemies, and to the house of the Lord, forever and ever. Thank you, God, for sending the Good Shepherd. Thank you, God, for sending us Jesus. God with us. God to lead us home.

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