

Psalm 23 is one of the most familiar and well-loved passages in all of God's Word. Like an old friend, many of us have known it since childhood. This is the psalm that we want to hear when we're stricken with grief or when our bodies begin to fail us. We welcome it from our hospital bed. We lean on it when we stand at the grave.

Why does Psalm 23 have such a hold on us? Why has it been at the center of the prayer life of Christians for hundreds and hundreds of years? I believe it's because in it we see the love of our Lord most clearly. When we recite the psalm as our confession of faith, we recognize that the story of God and David portrayed here is just as much the story of Jesus and us. We are the sheep. We are Christ's people. With this in mind, I'd like to put this morning's sermon in the form of a personal testimony, but please understand: It applies just as much to you as it does to me.

The Lord is **my** Shepherd. I know that sounds like bragging, but I'm boasting about Him, not me. I had nothing to do with becoming one of His sheep. "You didn't choose me," Jesus said, "I chose you." He found me and made me His own. He branded me with His mark of ownership. At Baptism He put the sign of His cross upon my forehead and my heart. He named me and claimed me. I belong to Him completely- my head and my heart, body, and soul. I am a sheep of His pasture, and He is my Shepherd.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing." Oh, I may not be the wealthiest sheep in His pasture, but I lack nothing. I have all that I need to support my body and life. What's more, I have His Word, His forgiveness, His peace, and eternal life. Jesus says, "My sheep listen to My Voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish." Having that, what more do I need?

Listen to all my Shepherd does for me. He makes me lie down in green pasture. Like all sheep, I find it hard to lie down and relax. I tend to be nervous, worried over the problems I face in life. As one of the Good Shepherd's sheep, I fret over the wolves and the snakes, the irritations of other sheep, the flies that bug and pester me. It's so hard for me to lie down and rest, but my Shepherd knows that I need to rest. "Come to Me," Jesus says, "you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." He

makes sure that my pastureland is green and grassy and that there's plenty of it to lie down in. Every Sunday, He provides a pasture rich and green with His Word and Sacrament.

He has to *make* me lie down, or I wouldn't do it. I think I'm just too busy to rest and remember all that He has promised to give me. Or I get distracted by something else. Or I'm tempted to go off and nibble on weeds instead of rich pasture. My Shepherd knows how bad that is for me, so He pokes and prods me back to where the pasture is green. Sometimes I get irritated with Him for that. He seems so insistent that I lie down and rest in His green pasture. I know He's concerned for me. The last thing any good shepherd wants is skinny, malnourished sheep.

He leads me beside quiet waters. Sheep tend to drink from any puddle they come across- polluted springs, putrid ponds, cesspools. The world is full of bad drink- drunkenness, immorality, materialism, power, pride, revenge. We try to satisfy our thirst for life on these things, but none of them work. They end up making you more thirsty or sick. Some can even kill you. My Good Shepherd knows that I need fresh, clean water. He leads me to springs of living water. "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst," Jesus says. He leads me to Baptism and to the peaceful waters of His Word. He leads me to confess my sins and to hear His forgiveness. Every day He refreshes me with living water.

He restores my soul. He gives me life again. Once I was dead, dead in sin, but my Shepherd made me alive (Eph. 2:1). I was weighed down by sin and guilt, helpless against the attacks of predators. I couldn't move and couldn't help myself back on my feet. My Shepherd went and searched for me and found me lying there. He restored my life. He set me back up on my feet. The Good Shepherd restores my soul with His life.

"He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." I like to wander off the path on which He leads me. The apostle Peter speaks the truth in his first letter, "You were like sheep going astray," (1 Peter 2: 25). We American sheep are especially prone to staking out individual paths for ourselves. We don't like to follow the trails of others. We don't like being part of a flock under a shepherd. We'd rather blaze our own trails and do what we feel like doing. My Shepherd knows how dangerous

that kind of wandering can be. He is patient and kind. He gently guides me along His paths. These are the well-worn paths of the faithful, those who trusted in God's mercy before me: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They're the paths walked by David himself, and the prophets, by the apostles and the evangelists, by saints and martyrs, the church down through history. The world believes that all paths lead to the same place. In a way that's true. All paths lead to death and destruction. All roads lead to hell. Except one. The path of the Good Shepherd leads to life. It is the path of righteousness for His Name's sake.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The Good Shepherd's way is the way of the cross and the empty tomb, the way of repentance and faith, the way of confession and forgiveness. All other roads lead to death. The way of the Good Shepherd leads to righteousness, not for my sake or for anything I've done, but for **His** name's sake. He gives me His righteousness with His name. That's what is so amazing about the Good Shepherds' way. Everything is received as a gift- forgiveness, life, salvation, His Name.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." Every day I walk through death's valley. Its dark walls surround me on every side. "We face death all day long," the apostle Paul says in Romans 8. "We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." The enemy is real. He's all around us, lurking in the cliffs and the caves, prowling around like a hungry lion, looking for someone to devour, but I'm not afraid, because my Shepherd is with me. He has gone this way before, ahead of me. He has gone through death's valley and emerged victorious. My Good Shepherd rose from the dead. He knows the way through this dark and dangerous valley. He's the only one Who can lead me through it. My Shepherd is with me. He is with me in my Baptism, in His Word, in His Supper. There is never a time or a place that He is not with me. Nothing in this dark valley can snatch me out of His hand.

"His rod and His staff, they comfort me." With His rod, the Shepherd disciplines; with His staff He consoles. His Law and His Gospel. With His rod He disciplines in love. He protects me from myself, from my destructive ways, my wanderings. He shows me my sin, not to condemn

me, but to drive me to His staff of forgiveness. With the staff of His Gospel, He nudges me, assuring me of His presence, comforting me. With His Gospel staff He frees me from the entanglements of sins, He rescues me from trouble, He pulls me back to life.

“He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” My Shepherd feeds me. “Take eat,” He says. “This is My body. Take, drink, this is My blood.” “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise Him up at the last day.” Imagine how much it cost my Shepherd to feed me; His very life, given into death on the cross! All for me, a sinful wayward sheep. He prepares this table for me in the presence of my enemies- sin, death, the devil. Those hungry wolves don’t dare touch me at His table. “He anoints my head with oil.” My Shepherd knows my wounds and open sores, the places where I have hurt myself or where others have hurt me. He pours on His healing oil. He tends to my wounds. I confess my sins to my Good Shepherd. I tell Him exactly where the hurt is, and He pours on the oil of His forgiveness right where it’s needed. He gives me His Holy Spirit and anoints me with the oil of gladness.

I’m fortunate to have such a Shepherd. I really am a blessed sheep. I can truly say, “My cup runs over.” It overflows with my Shepherd’s good gifts. He fills my cup to overflowing with life, with forgiveness, with peace, with joy. I don’t deserve any of this, but He gives it all for His name’s sake, and there is no end to His giving.

And I still haven’t told you about His sheep dogs yet, have I? Every shepherd has sheep dogs. My Shepherd’s dogs are named “Goodness” and “Mercy.” Goodness and Mercy follow me all the days of my life, nipping at my heels, barking at me, playfully keeping my Shepherd's flock together. Those old sheep dogs never let me out of their sight. They remind me of how good my Good Shepherd is. When I wander too far from the flock, they bark and nip at my heels to bring me back to the fold. When I’m threatened, they circle around me to protect me. Even when I can’t see my Shepherd, I know that He is near, because His Goodness and Mercy are always following me.

I don’t know all that the future holds for me. That’s in the hands of my Good Shepherd. One thing I am sure of: I will live in my Shepherd's

house forever. "My sheep listen to my voice," Jesus says, "I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand." Thanks be to God that Jesus is my Good Shepherd!

The truly wonderful part is that He is not just *my* Shepherd, but He is *yours*, too! He gives you everything, so you lack nothing, not only all you need to support this body and life, but also His Word, forgiveness, peace, and eternal life. He gives you His living water in Baptism and in His Word. The Good Shepherd restores your soul, gives you life again. The Good Shepherd guides you along the true path. He keeps you from wandering and gives you His righteousness. He keeps you safe in death's dark valley. He is always with you, in your Baptism, in His Word, and in His Supper. The Good Shepherd disciplines and consoles you with His rod and staff. He prepares a table for you with His Body and Blood. He heals you. And yes, Goodness and Mercy are following you, too. Rest assured that Jesus, the Good Shepherd is your Good Shepherd, too! Amen!