

Psalm 23
“The Lord is My Shepherd”
Fourth Sunday of Easter (B)

April 21, 2024
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“The Lord is my Shepherd...” (Psalm 23:1a)

Psalm 23 is the most familiar psalm. It is familiar to us. It is familiar to the fallen world. Psalm 23 is like an old friend that many of us have known from childhood. We hear it spoken in movies and television shows as the actor preacher stands in the rain reciting Psalm 23 as the casket is lowered into the ground. We hear it spoken even by non-Christians. Psalm 23 is among the most well-known chapters in all of Scripture, right along with John 3 and John 10.

Among Christians and non-Christians, Psalm 23 is what we *want* to hear when we are stricken with grief. This is the psalm that we *want* to hear when our bodies fail us. We welcome it from our hospital bed. We lean on it when we stand at the grave.

But Psalm 23 isn't just about death, it is also about life. In fact, Psalm 23 is about our life now as we live in this valley of sorrows with sin and death surrounding us, and Psalm 23 is, indeed, about our future life in the Church Triumphant.

Whether it be now, or in the future, we depend on Psalm 23 because of what those Words of God give us: strength to go forward by propping up our weak faith. Those words of Psalm 23 remind us that the path we are walking now while following Christ is sure and certain. ***“He leads [us] in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake”*** (Psalm 23:3b). This path, led by the Good Shepherd, is a path without visible road signs, but this path is certain, because He leads. It is our Shepherd's path, along which we are being led.

Sheep need shepherds. Sheep without a shepherd are doomed. They scatter and are picked off one by one by wolves and other predators. We, too, are like sheep, as without a shepherd, we would wander off into false worship, which leads to eternal death.

If we would remain in our trespasses and sins, we would be doomed, but for us and for our salvation, the Good Shepherd rescued us wandering sheep as He laid down His life for you to only take it up again (John 10:18). The Good Shepherd came down from heaven to save us. The Good Shepherd doesn't cut and run in order to save His own skin when the fight to save you gets tough. He doesn't let Satan and his demonic wolves sink their teeth into His sheep. Instead, the Good Shepherd suffers for us. He purposely was betrayed, mocked, cursed, crucified, and damned. He presented Himself as a Lamb going uncomplaining forth to suffer the guilt of sinners in our place (LSB 438).

Psalm 23 is the story of Jesus, our faithful Shepherd, who leads His people out of the land of death – *our life now* – and through His death and bodily resurrection, He leads us into life everlasting.

The first four verses of Psalm 23 describe our present experience:

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.***
- 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
for his name's sake.***
- 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.***

Our whole life here on earth is lived under the shadow of our enemy: death. Certainly, our life has its joys and celebrations. Yet, our life is also lived under a shadow, an overcast sky that won't go away even as we celebrate and laugh. This shadow of death is the sad reality we have since Man's Fall into sin.

This journey through the valley of the shadow of death can seem like a lonely walk that only ends in defeat. But we who are in Christ have the Good Shepherd's promise that we do not walk alone. With us walks the Shepherd who has trod this same path before us. This Shepherd is Jesus who stands beside us today in our griefs to give us guidance and direction. But how does the Good Shepherd give us guidance and direction? **The Good Shepherd calls His sheep and they follow His voice.**

Sheep have impeccable hearing. Multiple flocks can be merged together at night and then separated in the morning, simply by their shepherd's calling. This is what Jesus says of us earlier in John 10: ***"The sheep hear His voice, and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. When He has brought out all His own, He goes before them, and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice"*** (John 10:3-4).

Fellow sheep, Jesus leads you by His voice. Jesus first tenderly taught you to recognize His voice at your Baptism, and through Word and Sacraments, He continues to teach you and lead you through this fallen world with His voice. ***But*** we must all learn to distinguish His voice – *the Word of Scripture* – from the loud and alluring voices of our day. His voice calls you to repentance. His voice calls you to remember your Baptism. His voice calls you to feed on the lush pastures of His Word, His two-edged sword of Law and Gospel. His voice calls you to His Table as He gives you His life-giving flesh and blood spread before you, even while Satan, sin, and death still surround you.

But take notice: all the important actions in Psalm 23 happen by the Good Shepherd's work, not yours. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads. He restores. He leads.

So, we must watch out as we live in this valley,

- for there are wolves and thieves aplenty who would rather teach you that Holy Baptism is your work, instead of the work of God – something you do to show yourself to be a sheep rather than the brand the Good Shepherd puts on you to make you as His own. As if a sheep could brand itself.
- There are those who want to teach you that the Lord's Supper is not the table of the Good Shepherd's body and blood, but only a symbolic supper as we remember fondly what Jesus did for us. As if a sheep could feed itself.
- There are those who would turn you inward to your wants, your beliefs, your feelings, to your self-centered desires, your pride, and away from Jesus and His blood-bought gifts. As if a sheep could shepherd itself.

Jesus says, ***"Flee from them!"*** (John 10:5). So, we must flee from anyone who would turn us away from the Good Shepherd! Instead, we must all give careful attention to the voice of the Good Shepherd, and gladly hear them, read, mark, learn, and take His Words to heart, so that He feeds us, directs us, leads us, and comforts us.

The last two verses of Psalm 23 focus both on the now and on the promise of the age to come.

In these verses, the Good Shepherd prepares a table before us. He is hospitable to His sheep. The Good Shepherd not only gives us our daily bread – *all the needs of our body, such as food, clothing and shelter* – but He gives us the gift of His very Body and very Blood in the Lord’s Supper for the forgiveness of our sins and to strengthen our weak faith.

The cup that overflows is the grace that we have received by faith in Jesus Christ. For although we were dead in sin, Jesus took upon Himself the death we deserve upon the cross, so that we would be made righteous by grace through faith in Him. So, when we repent and confess our sins to God, our sins are wiped away. We are forgiven. The Good Shepherd gives all who believe in Him this goodness and mercy all their lives, including into the Church Triumphant, as He never forsakes His flock.

Now, there are times when you might feel abandoned. There may be times that you think God may be punishing you. There may be times that you think God doesn’t care for you. But what does God say in Psalm 23? You are not alone. He cares for you. He will never forsake His sheep. **Jesus is your Good Shepherd, who comforts you, who cares for you.** He sends goodness and mercy. He leads you right into His house here today and will keep you who follow Him in His house forever.

Again, sheep that are separated from the flock are easy pickings for the wolves. So, Christians do not – *and cannot* – go it alone, for that would be going against the very voice of the Good Shepherd. Those who call themselves Christians without attending the Divine Service tend to believe in a little bit of everything, and in time will wind up believing nothing at all. So, sheep who don’t learn the voice of their Shepherd will soon follow any voice. Outside the Good Shepherd’s Word and Sacraments is only a world that is cold and deadly, where there is neither forgiveness nor life.

But here in the Lord’s house, He restores the joy of salvation to your soul! Here, the Good Shepherd guides us to safety while we live in this dark valley. Here and now, the Good Shepherd gives to you the gift of forgiveness! Here, the Good Shepherd gives the foretaste of the heavenly feast as He serves you forgiveness, life, and salvation through His body and blood under the bread and wine. Here, the Good Shepherd fills our cups to overflowing with His grace and mercy, so that we may dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen. + **SOLI DEO GLORIA** +