

4th Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017

Pastor Jasper Sellnow
Mount Olive Lutheran Church

Theme: The LORD is my Shepherd
Text: **Psalm 23**

The Word of God we'll focus on today is the 23rd Psalm.

A psalm of David.

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.**
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,**
- 3 he restores my soul.
He guides 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.**
- 5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.**
- 6 Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

This is the Word of the LORD. Let's begin with prayer.

Lord Jesus, through all the length of days

Your goodness fails me never.

Good Shepherd, may I sing your praise

Within your house forever! (Christian Worship 375 vs. 6 alt.)

It was just another day in the hill country outside of Bethlehem. As David woke up he looked north and saw the hills rise into the Judean mountain range. He scanned the horizon and began his count... for a shepherd-boy, counting sheep was not a task to do as he drifted to sleep, but was part of his routine throughout the day. You see, sheep had a tendency to wander... and it was up to the shepherd to make sure nothing bad happened to them as they were moving from pasture to pasture. Yes, this day was like most days... until David noticed a problem with his counting... a sheep was missing.

He ran to the top of the hill he was on and shielded his eyes from the rising sun, searching for his lost sheep... and then he saw it. It was in the mouth of a lion and about to become a meal. David didn't hesitate. He grabbed his staff and tore down the hill toward that sheep, saying a silent prayer on the way. Somehow he managed to catch up to the predator, and his staff landed a swift blow on the lion who dropped his prey and turned on the young shepherd. David didn't retreat... he sidestepped the lunging beast and grabbed it by its hair before landing a fatal blow... then he turned and lifted up his wounded sheep and placed it on his shoulder... carrying it home to the rest of the flock.

I've never been a shepherd. But I can tell you this. If a lion ever took one of my sheep, I don't know that my first instinct would have been to chase it down and kill it. But David did. David was a good shepherd. And he cared for his sheep in a way that makes us marvel. And yet while David was *a* good shepherd, he knew he was not *the* Good Shepherd... he knew who watched over him... he knew who gave him strength to battle lions and bears in the hill country of Bethlehem... it was the same Good Shepherd who was with him as he told this story to King Saul as David prepared to battle a giant warrior named Goliath. David had the LORD as his Shepherd. And David knew his Good Shepherd would provide for him, would protect him, and would never leave him. David knew that with his Good Shepherd by his side he could always be at peace...

Now if you know anything about the life of David, perhaps you would not call him a man who was at peace. In fact he was at war most of his life. Fighting lions and bears and even Goliath was only the beginning of a lifetime of battle against his enemies. Sometimes those enemies came from the outside, like the Philistines. At other times the enemy came from within as he was forced to run from King Saul and later even his own son who wanted him dead. And sometimes the worst enemy was himself. He battled a sinful nature that led him into deception, adultery, and even murder... And yet... in all of this David was a man who was at peace. How? Well, not because the outward circumstances of his life were so peaceful, but because of the peace he knew in his heart... the peace that came from his Good Shepherd, the LORD.

And in one of David's most famous psalms, Psalm 23, we get a glimpse of this peace David knew because the LORD was his shepherd... and my friends, your God would have you hear these words of comfort today and recognize the truth David knew for himself... a truth about God that will bring you peace. **The LORD is my Shepherd.**

It's no coincidence that "**The LORD**" is the first word of this psalm. This name, which we recognize in our English Bibles with all capital letters, was the special name God had revealed to the people of Israel. He defined this name for Moses, telling him: "**The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.**" (Exodus 34:6-7). This was the name of the God who always kept his promises. The LORD meant faithfulness. And so what a comforting thing to know that he is the one who shepherd his people.

But while the LORD is certainly the Shepherd for the entire flock, notice David did not write, “The LORD is Israel’s shepherd” or, “The LORD is his people’s shepherd.” He wrote “**The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.**” What an amazing thing to know that the God of the universe is not so busy tending to other matters... tending to other sheep... that he doesn’t have time to tend to me. No, he is my Shepherd... my very own. And I am his little lamb. He loves me every day the same... he even calls me by my name. I am his and he is mine.

And because the LORD is *my* Shepherd, I lack nothing. Oh sure, I may want a good many things in this life... you might too. You might want better physical health... earthly wealth... nicer clothes... some nicer toys... a newer phone... Maybe for some you’d like a better boss... a better job... any job... or you might wish you had a better boyfriend... or any boyfriend... there’s probably a list of “wants” that could go on and on... but in the end the truth remains the same. With the LORD as our Shepherd we truly want for nothing... there is no need our God does not meet. Sure, there are things we might think we need, but thankfully we have a Good Shepherd who knows best how to care for his sheep. He won’t give us things we want if he knows they will bring us eternal harm. And he will always give us the good things our souls need to be fed and nourished.

David writes: **He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.** I don’t know a whole lot about sheep, but I do know one thing for certain. They like to eat. And a shepherd is constantly having to make sure his flock has the food and water it needs. Our LORD treats us the same way. He knows that deep in us is a hunger... a hunger for eternity... a hunger to be at peace with him forever in that eternity. And he feeds that hunger with the richest food and the finest drink as we feast on his Word and drink in his promises. God himself tells us how his Word nourishes our souls: **Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. (Isaiah 55:2-3).**

And isn’t that the truth you find every time you feed on God’s Word? I sometimes think back to earlier times in my life when I was not attending worship and Bible study regularly, and I remember how my soul was starving for the nourishment it needed... and it showed in my daily life. And even today I find that when I miss my regular time in God’s Word devotionally each day I suffer for it. But when I eat and drink God’s Word on a regular basis my soul is refreshed. When I eat and drink my Savior’s body and blood in the Sacrament my soul is restored. These are the only means of grace, the only tool God uses to give strength and peace to our weary souls. This is where we find the tracks of righteousness laid down by our Savior... a path which he walked in our place... and now a path he leads us down as we walk toward our eternal home. Friends, when we feed on Word and Sacrament regularly we find that, while our problems in life don’t disappear – just like David’s didn’t – we are better prepared to face them... because we know who is with us.

In fact, David talks about the confidence he had in the face of the dark valleys of this life. He says: **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.** When it feels like the darkness of this life is closing in... maybe it’s the pressures and persecutions of this world, or the silent

assaults of Satan, or just the dark desires of our own sinful hearts... when those enemies surround us... and the shadow of death threatens us... even then... we need not be afraid. Instead of fearing the darkness we can look to the LORD of light who walks with us... who is armed and ready to do battle with any enemy who would seek to threaten our souls.

One of the interesting features of the 23rd Psalm is found in this verse. The words **“for you are with me”** are the middle words of this Psalm. And in addition to that when you count up the Hebrew words on either side of this central phrase you find 26 words. And 26 just so happens to be the numerical equivalent of God’s special name in Hebrew: The LORD. And this truth is not just central to this psalm, but is central to my life as a Christian. The LORD is with me. The LORD is always with me. When I am hungry, scared, lonely, or just plain tired in this life... The LORD is with me. He protects me... he provides for me... he saves me.

David drives this point home as he closes this psalm: **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.** Despite the troubles we face in this life, our enemies can ultimately only watch as the LORD spreads a banquet before us in his Word... as he fills our cups to overflowing with one spiritual blessing after another. Our enemies can do their worst in this life... they can pursue us and try to destroy us... but it matters not. God’s goodness and faithful mercy chase after us... cover our tracks... and overwhelm us with grace as long as we live on this earth. And in the end, even death cannot win, because our forever-home with the LORD waits for us in heaven.

The LORD is *my* Shepherd. I lack nothing. What amazing words of comfort and promise... and we know we can trust every last promise in this psalm because of what our Shepherd did for us... You see, the LORD knew that in order for these marvelous words of spiritual comfort and peace to be ours eternally... he knew he would have to do something far greater than what David did when he rescued his sheep from viscous enemies. Our great and faithful Shepherd knew he would have to not just chase after the sheep... but become one of the sheep. And that’s just what he did.

The LORD, the LORD, the faithful God who had promised a Savior... he took on flesh and became one of us. Jesus rightly called himself **“the Good Shepherd”** in the Gospel today... but he was also the innocent Lamb of God who would take our place under God’s wrath. God spoke of how Jesus would do this through his prophet Isaiah saying, **“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter.” (Isaiah 55:5-7).**

Yes... the Shepherd became one of the sheep... and he paid the price for our sins... he died for the flock who loved to wander. He died for you. He died for me...

But a dead shepherd does not do his sheep any good... if he had simply died in battle with our enemies and stayed in the grave, we would be in even worse danger... but we do not have a dead

Shepherd... we have a Risen and Ever-Living Shepherd. We heard that good news in our 2nd Lesson today from Hebrews, how our LORD, **the God of peace... brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep. (Hebrews 13:20).**

Jesus is alive. My Shepherd lives and gives me full confidence that his promises to feed and tend me... to provide for me and protect me... to guide me and go with me... all these promises can be trusted... because not only did he conquer sin on the cross but he kept his promise to rise from the grave and destroy the power of death for all who belong to his flock. Yes, the LORD is *my* Shepherd... the LORD Jesus is *my* Good Shepherd... *your* Good Shepherd.

And so fellow-sheep... Follow your Shepherd... Listen to his voice. Feast on the food of his gospel! Rest in the arms which he stretched out in death for you! And know that no matter what Satan, this world, or your own sinful flesh try to do to rob you of peace... Jesus never leaves you, he loves you every day the same, he knows your name, and he will shepherd you through this life to the eternal life he won for you... the home that waits in heaven for all of God's flock... a home, the LORD tells us, where **The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.'** 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'" (Revelation 7:17). Amen.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21).