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Pentecost XX & Proper 23
October 11, 2026
Text: Psalm 23
Title: Christ Wants Me, So I Want Not (based on a sermon from CPR)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. It's one of the most famous and loved passages in the entire Bible. It's been quoted in movies and music of all types. If you ask even the most marginal Christian to give you a quote from the Bible, they're likely to know at least one part of the 23rd Psalm.

You know the way it begins, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." After the cross, it's hard to think of a picture that captures Jesus' ministry to us more than the image of the Good Shepherd. We might think of an image of sheep set against deep green grass, rich blue sky, and white puffy clouds, but that's not the whole story. The fact is that there are many dangers for those of us who are nearly helpless sheep.

Sheep need their shepherd. Scattered sheep are doomed. That's why the Lord laments in Ezekiel 34, "They are scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts." In Ezekiel, God files His complaint against the first shepherds that He provided to His people, the kings and priests of Israel. They were supposed to feed, protect, and lead the children of Israel in the Lord's pleasant pastures. But instead they led them into false worship. It wasn't that they denied Yahweh; they just allowed the people to worship the true God *and also* the false gods popular at the time. These negligent shepherds decided that it didn't matter what the people believed, as long as they were spiritual and religious it all led them to the same place. They could worship Yahweh faithfully, and they could worship the many idols of the day also.

The truth was that these "shepherds" didn't really love the Lord or His flock. They loved themselves. They loved fitting in with the spirituality of the day. They loved the income and

earthly peace they thought would be theirs by embracing the sins and self-made salvations that surrounded their land, and the sheep were scattered and destroyed because of their neglect.

The Lord God spoke in full, righteous wrath to His people through Ezekiel, “Behold, I am against the shepherds...No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves.” Then He proclaimed a most merciful promise at the same time, “Behold, *I, I myself* will search for my sheep and will seek them out.” After all the failures of the shepherds that He had appointed as kings and priests, the Lord appointed Himself as the Shepherd of His people. As David taught us to sing, “The *Lord* is my shepherd!” This beautiful promise is fulfilled in Christ Jesus, the Lord who has taken on our flesh. The Lord who rescues us. He lays down His own life for His sheep; He leads His sheep; He never abandons His flock.

First, the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. Having come down from heaven to save us, Jesus is not a deserter. He doesn’t cut and run in order to save His own skin when the fight to save you gets tough. He doesn’t let the satanic lion and demon-driven dogs sink their teeth into His sheep. Jesus puts Himself into the lion’s mouth and lets the dogs surround and corner Him. He suffered for you. He made Himself a silent, uncomplaining lamb in your place.

Jesus suffered without threatening and was hated without hating others, because He was bearing our consequences for wandering away; He got what a lone, isolated, scattered sheep deserved. The Lord had promised through Ezekiel, “As a shepherd seeks out His flock when He is among His sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.” On the darkest day – a Friday that we now call Good – your Good Shepherd delivered you by delivering Himself into death. The Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep.

And He leads His sheep. The Shepherd calls His sheep and they follow His voice. Of course, a dead shepherd doesn't help His sheep for long. Soon the wolves' stomachs are empty. But our Shepherd not only lays down His life, He takes it up again. He rises from the dead to lead you.

I've been told that sheep have excellent hearing. Multiple flocks can be merged together at night and then separated in the morning, simply by the sound of their own shepherds' calling. This is what Jesus means in John 10 when He says of Himself as the Shepherd, "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."

My friends, the Lord Jesus leads you by His voice. He first taught you to recognize His voice at your Baptism, and through the Word and the Sacrament of the Altar, He continues to teach you and lead you through this sinful world with His voice. But you must learn to recognize His voice that you hear in the Holy Scriptures. You have to know His voice from the cacophony of loud and alluring voices of the world around you. His voice calls you to repent, calls you to the anointing of your head with the oil of Holy Baptism, calls you to feed on the lush pastures of His Word and at the Table of His life-giving flesh and blood even while Satan, sin, and death surround you. Notice in Psalm 23 that all the important actions are done by the Shepherd, not by you. *He* makes me lie down in green pastures; *He* leads, *He* restores.

But watch out, for there are wolves and thieves all over with big mouths, and we sheep can hear them just as easily as our Shepherd. They would teach you that Holy Baptism is your own work, instead of God's — something you do to make yourself into a sheep rather than one who has the brand of the cross that the Good Shepherd puts on you to mark you as His own. As if a sheep could or would brand itself! There are wolves 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 by which we think fondly and feel good about what Jesus did for us. As if a sheep could somehow feed itself!

There are those who would turn you inward to focus on your own believing, to your own piety, to your own feelings and your own effort and works, to focus on yourself and what you do, and away from Jesus and what He has done and what He has given us with His blood-bought gifts. As if a sheep could shepherd itself! There are those who tell you that receiving Jesus' work isn't enough to save you. You must have enough love and do enough good to make it to heaven. As if a sheep could defeat the prowling lion! And there are those who tell you that they can give you success, wealth, and health because if you just say their prayer repeatedly or follow their rules then you can make God give you what you want and do what you want. As if a sheep can somehow turn itself into a successful sheep and make the shepherd do only what it wants!

You have to be on the watch for these wolves and thieves so that you can flee from them, and so that you don't follow them as Christ warns you. Martin Luther wrote, "If you wish, therefore, to be richly supplied in both body and soul, then above all give careful attention to the voice of the Shepherd, listen to His words, let Him feed you and direct you; let Him lead you and protect you and comfort you...hold fast to His Word, hear and learn it gladly, for then you will be well supplied in both body and soul." The Good Shepherd will lead you.

And the Good Shepherd never abandons His flock, ever. The author of Psalm 23, King David, faced death many times, and the words of this Psalm are a prayer that he gives us to use, "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." There are times when you might feel abandoned. Why would a caring shepherd lead me through the valley of the shadow of death?

Why would the death of a dear one cast a shadow over me? Why does my own death loom before me? Has the Good Shepherd left me? Is it because of my sin or my failure?

No. Not at all. He is not punishing you. No, He has not failed to care for you. "I will fear no evil, for you are with me." Jesus is with us in death. He went through it first for you to open the way to everlasting life. Jesus is with you when you mourn and as you grieve the loss of the people that you love. He wept at Lazarus's tomb. Jesus is your Good Shepherd, who comforts you. He sends goodness and mercy to follow you joyfully at your heels. Your Good Shepherd has led you right into His house here today, and He will keep you who follow Him in His house forever.

Sheep that are separated from their flock are easy pickings for predators. Christians aren't supposed to go it alone – that would be going against the very voice of the Good Shepherd. Experience teaches us that people without a congregation tend to believe in a little bit of everything, and so in truth they end up believing in nothing at all. Sheep who don't learn the voice of their Shepherd will soon follow any voice. Outside His Church, it's cold and deadly – there is no forgiveness, there is no hope, there is no life out there at all.

But here, in the Lord's house where His flock is gathered, the Lord restores the joy of salvation to your soul. The Lord brings you back to Him rejoicing. The Lord binds up your wounds. He guides you in His righteous way, and provides for your needs. The Lord is with you and comforts you even under the dark shadows of death. Because of your Good Shepherd's boundless, selfless love, received by the faith that He supplies, "...surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life, and you will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever." Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.