

Sermon ✝ April 25, 2021
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I was a newly ordained and anxious pastor. It was one of my first funerals and so I wanted to be relevant and sincere and caring. But because I had so recently graduated from the seminary, I also had this unknown need to show off my vast years of training.

And so in the context of a simple funeral service, I used a modern liturgy with all new translations. I was going to show those folks in that Northern Wisconsin fishing village that their new pastor knew his stuff and had paid attention in class. The scripture portion of the liturgy included the 23rd Psalm. I had selected the translation from the Jerusalem Bible. It was the same psalm, mind you, but it didn't sound quite the same: "*Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing. In meadows of green grass he lets me lie. To the waters of repose he leads me; there he revives my soul . . .*"

It was after the service when we were back in the church parlors and I was strutting around like the cock-of-the-walk (expecting all the praise that I certainly deserved), that *it* happened.

Her name was Marie. She was a delicate and frail old gal, well-on into her eighties. And when she grabbed my arm and pulled me aside to talk I knew it would be difficult to maintain my humble composure as she generously complimented me for the fine job I had done for her dear friend's funeral.

"You have a nice speaking voice", she began. I could already feel the adrenaline of pride swelling up within me. She continued, *"but that was the worst funeral I've ever attended. I don't know where you got that service from . . . but wherever it's from, you can take it back! And as for my own funeral you better not tamper with the 23rd Psalm, I want my mourners to be comforted not confused!!"*

And so it is that I learned that day about funerals and scripture. Now there is nothing wrong with new translations but certain passages of scripture have special meaning as they are remembered in the translation in which they were first learned. Some ten months later, Marie died. At her funeral I read the 23rd Psalm from the King James.

The twenty-third psalm. It is the best-known of all psalms. It is the comfortable pair of slippers of the Old Testament. The little girl who began to recite the psalm saying, *"The Lord is my shepherd; that's all I want,"* expressed the feeling of the world of believers. It continues to be popular because it continues to speak to our condition. And the tremendous way in which this psalm uses words that evoke believable mental pictures has greatly contributed to its universal appeal.

It is unfortunate, in a way, that we seem to only associate the reading of this psalm with funerals. Of course the message of the psalm is a great comfort when mourning the death of a loved one, but it is a psalm for all times and all occasions. Today morning we consider the implications of the 23rd Psalm for our daily living. Perhaps the easiest way to do this will be to look at a few key verses.

The fourth Sunday of Easter is often called "Good Shepherd Sunday" as the references to sheep are in all the lessons. It is perhaps a symbolism that early Christians could relate to in a different way than we can. We are now mainly an urban society. The early writers and readers of the Bible were an agricultural society and understood sheep.

Our Lord often likens us to sheep. Is he paying us a compliment? What are sheep really like? Talk to a real shepherd sometime and you will likely get different thoughts on the matter. He/she will tell you that pound for pound, sheep are probably the most ignorant and blundering domesticated animals.

Sheep are blind to danger. They must be led to pasture or they will not find it. And even here is another problem because they don't lead very well. They have a hard time remembering whom they are to follow, and sometimes follow the wrong leader. The effort to follow a real leader often becomes too much for sheep, and then they go blundering off into underbrush or onto rocky ledges. Once trapped, they have neither the physical strength nor the emotional stability to find their way back to safety.

Perhaps it is just too deflating to our egos when we see the real nature of sheep, and realize the Lord likened us to them. But it is all very necessary to see ourselves as sheep really are. For then and only then will we see the utter necessity of a shepherd . . . not just any shepherd, but the Good Shepherd who rescues us from our aimless wanderings in the world of sin, who redeems our life from destruction, who leads us in the path of righteousness, and who in the end, crowns us with life-everlasting.

And so it is that I find great comfort in Jesus' words: *"I am the Good Shepherd, I know my sheep and they know me." . . . "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...."*

There are rich mental pictures to be found in this "walk" imagery. It is a walk without fear . . . although there is much that we fear. The darkness, for instance. A young child often needs the security of a light burning beside their bed in the night for they are afraid of the dark.

Most adults do not need a light at night, but we, nonetheless, do fear the dark. We fear the dark of the unknown; be it job security . . . our health . . . national disasters. In the midst of this valley of death there is a light . . . much stronger than any child's night-light. The light is, of course, Jesus Christ who has gone into that valley ahead of us.

He has conquered the unknown on our behalf. He has faced our fears. *"I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."* ~ John 8:12 He has placed a light there for those who must travel in that valley.

It is also a walk in fellowship. We do not have to go it alone. Somehow we think we are stronger if we face all of our trials alone. It is inbred into us. It is a part of the American pioneer/immigrant spirit. Scripture is full of references pointing to the fact that God wishes us to be in fellowship. Beginning with Genesis: *"I will provide a partner for the man so he does not have to be alone."*

This God is not a fair weather friend, *"I will be with you always...even to the end of time."* And , it is a walk in faith. Very little in life is without its risks. For us to follow the Good Shepherd means that we have to take some faith risks. And once again, it is a difficult thing for modern, self-sufficient people to do.

We sometimes become so hung-up on ourselves and our abilities that we forget who created us in the first place . . . "God alone is great!" We must walk by faith and be assured that Jesus will guide us along the paths of this life and the next. To know that he is with us gives us the, power to cope with the myriad of problems that make up our days. Have faith! He will lead us through the dark valley and when we need him most he will be there.

The Psalm closes with the beautiful scene of Oriental hospitality that shows the overflowing generosity of the host. Not to be taken for granted is this generosity that so gladdens our hearts, for it is a costly grace! *"I am the Good Shepherd,"* said Jesus, and then he added, *"the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep."* One thinks long and hard on reading these words.

We can never take lightly the wonderful blessings that make our cup run over and that surround us with goodness and mercy all the days of our life, for the good shepherd has given his life for the sheep.

Our humble response of grateful faith and loyalty is to bind ourselves forever to our Lord who is our shepherd. Our highest joy is to be the sheep of his pasture.

