

Sermon for April 25, 2021
Good Shepherd Sunday
Pastor Dane Wood

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;^[a]

³ he restores my soul.^[b]

He leads me in right paths^[c]
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,^[d]

I 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^[e] goodness and mercy^[f] shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long

Sermon

Who has this as one of their top 5 scriptures? Psalm 23 This is a big favorite, even for people who have never been in a church or picked up a bible. Perhaps its most common at funerals. There is something reassuring, especially in hard times, about the image of green grassy meadows, and a cool stream and pool of water to rest beside. No matter how dark the day

or path, there is someone to guide us along. And as we end our journey along the path, we are bathed in oil and welcomed as a guest of honor at the table, or into the barn... wherever sheep end up. It's very comforting to know we have a shepherd... but if we have a shepherd... that means we are... Sheep.

There's just one problem with being a Sheep. Sheep are dumb. I think one of the reasons we love Psalm 23 so much is the truth hidden inside its words. We are dumb, just like sheep and we NEED a shepherd to guide us. The ancient Hebrews had to swallow a lot of pride when the priests and later Jesus called the people Sheep. They knew quiet a bit about them, as they were the main livestock of the area. Sheep are handy animals in that they give us wool, you can drink their milk or use it for cheese and butter, and they taste pretty good too. But Sheep are a pain to herd, ask any shepherd. Sheep stick their head in the grass, munch away and just meander about, paying no mind to where they are going or what they are doing. They'll walk into a pond or rushing river, walk over the side of a cliff, or right up under another sheep in front of them. They are concerned with eating, to solve that personal feeling of hunger, they mate, to solve that personal feeling of connection, and they sleep, to solve that personal lack of energy. It's a pretty selfish life. And single sheep will generally have a very short life because of this, they have a knack for walking into disaster. A lot like us, really.

In order to live a bit longer, Sheep will follow each other. They keep their head down, still munching away and they just look for the feet of another sheep nearby and follow that. They don't pay attention to where that sheep is going, whether it's good or not, they just follow, blindly. Then if you think about it, a little bit... who's the lead sheep following? No one... well... the herd ends up wandering about and walking into the lion's den. Not so good either.

Again, a lot like us... many of us, churched or not, spend a lot of time head down, minding our own selfish business and then when we do follow something, oh say achievements or pride, wealth or material gain, well, turns out we are just following another Sheep. Not exactly a great plan... a little better than going it alone, but still a rocky road.

Now, raise your hand if you want to be a Sheep? It means we are fools, blind, and have no care for ourselves or others. This is about the point I want to be a Goat, stronger, independent, and more outgoing... but then I remember what happens to the goats in another parable... (hint: they get thrown in the fire and gnashing teeth). So Sheep it is? It's not exactly a compliment to be called a Sheep, but we've been told the conventional wisdom of the world will be turned on its head by Christ. The first will be last and the last will be first... so we're to be the dumb sheep and not the strong goats.

But if we admit we are sheep, then that's where Psalm 23 sounds so wonderful to us, it feels so warm in our souls, because we know we need that shepherd to guide us along a good path. Our lives can be a mess, just like Sheep, if we have no one to guide us properly. And so we must find a good shepherd.

And who shall our Good Shepherd be? The Hebrew people were waiting for their shepherd, their savior... and Jesus came to lead them. "I am THE GOOD SHEPHERD." Jesus is our guide, he is the one that shall lead the sheep out of the bad rocky land, away from the wolves, and into a land of milk and honey.

How do we know the Good Shepherd? What does one look like, what do they do? We are told from the very start the most important thing... The GOOD SHEPHERD lays down his

life for the sheep. The shepherd has to lead the sheep away from danger, and be willingly to stand in harm's way in order to save them. But it's more than that. Jesus didn't say he was willing to die for his sheep... no... The Good Shepherd lays down his life... Jesus will die, he did die, for his sheep.

This is the difference between the Good Shepherd and just any old hired hand or bad shepherd that might be out with the flock. The hired hand will see the wolf coming, look at the sheep and say, "Nope... not worth it." He'll drop his staff and run. They ain't his sheep, no sense in dying for them. But the hard question is... who is the hired hand? If you are Sheep and Jesus is the Good Shepherd... that only leaves one person in this room... Who is the hired hand? Me.

Sorry, I know this is sort of bad news... but I'm only human. I've got problems and sins just like sheep. I may try to be a decent shepherd, it's sort of my calling... but at the end of the day, there is not a Pastor, Priest, Rabbi, or Right Reverend on this planet who can be called the Good Shepherd. Pastors are the hired hands. Now am I trying to abandon the sheep to ruin, absolutely not. I'm working hard with the Good shepherd to make sure the flock gets where it needs to go, but when the wolves come, when my life is in danger, when things are getting rough... Let's just be real... I might run. I don't want to... but I might. I want to stand up here and tell you I am a Good Shepherd, that I will sacrifice my life for you, and I want to believe that, you want to believe that... but it's not true... not like it's true for Jesus.

There are too many sheep in this world following hired hands. The Hired Hands don't own the sheep, they didn't pay for them... with blood. Remember that the next time you want to tell someone how great a Pastor or Preacher I am... which I know you do every day... multiple

times... but you don't belong to me... you belong to Christ, for he is THE GOOD SHEPHERD.
There's only one.

Jesus is the one who knows you and if you are following him, you will know him. This isn't just "knowing about" you or you "knowing about" Jesus. This is to Know... in the biblical sense. We usually say that with a sexual meaning, from the Old Testament... but here in the New Testament, this Greek word is the same. Jesus knows you from the inside out, every detail, every flaw and every perfection. The hired hand will never know you like that and you will never know me like that. But if you follow the Good Shepherd, you will know him as he knows you, and there will be no doubt that Jesus will give up his life for you.

The wonderful news here is that Jesus has done this of his own choosing. No one has taken it from him. He knows us so much, loves us so greatly, that to lay down his life is his privilege, his right, his choice. And the wonderful Easter miracle is that he has laid down his life and picked it up again, risen to guide us in life and death and life eternal. That is why he is the Good Shepherd and not anyone else.

We are Sheep and Jesus is our only Good Shepherd... so how do we follow him? Who knows John 3:16? Who knows 1 John 3:16? Add this one to your memory, and I might argue it's more practical and useful for your everyday life. 1 John 3:16 "This is how we know love: Jesus laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters." If we are sheep and Jesus is our shepherd, then we need to follow him. In following him we know Christ and we find out that what love is. And how do we show the Love of Christ in our hearts? 1 John 3:18 "Little Children... [Little Sheep...] let's not love with words or speech but with

action and truth. This is how we will know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts in God's presence."

John is laying it out pretty simply for us now. We are sheep, we are children... but we are God's Children. We are to rejoice and be thankful! We have not only a shepherd or hired hand, we have THE GOOD SHEPHERD to lead us, guide us, love us, and lay down his life for us. How do we follow the Shepherd? We lay down our lives for each other, we love not only in thought or belief. We can't just say to the hungry man who comes to our door, "Oh, I'm sorry, I won't give you any food, but I love you." No... we have to back it up with action, we have to let our faith be within us, but be us. If we are following the Good Shepherd than we know Jesus and he knows us... we must be his sheep... we must know his love... we must BE his love.