**May 3, 2020 Psalms 23:1-6**

***Are We Sheep?***

**Scripture:**

***Psalms 23:1-6 NRSV*** *(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 right paths for his name's sake. (4)Even though I walk through the darkest valley, 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 goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.*

***John 10:1-10 NRSV*** *(1)"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. (2)The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. (3)The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (4)When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. (5)They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." (6)Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. (7)So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. (8)All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. (9)I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. (10)The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

**Notes:**

1. Sheep are given a baaad ***reputation***.
2. David begins talking ***about*** God and transitions to talking ***with*** God;
3. We find ourselves in a place of confusion, worry, and ***uncertainty***.
   1. God is ***closer*** than you think.
   2. God ***allows*** us times in the valley.
4. Why would a shepherd lead a lamb into a valley filled with ***danger***?
   1. To get to some ***better*** place!
   2. Every valley is a pathway to something **better**.
   3. The Shepherd has you ***covered***.
5. To ***fight*** ***fear*** if you don't know what's going to happen next:
   1. Stay in God's ***presence***.
   2. See God’s ***power***.
   3. Experience God’s ***leading***.
6. Is the Lord your ***shepherd*** today?
   1. The Lord is ***with*** you.
   2. ***Learn*** the sound of His voice;
7. So, the question remains, “Are ***we*** sheep?”
   1. In God’s presence; we can walk ***without*** fear.
   2. God’s Power will ***lead*** us through difficult times and places.
   3. Experience God ***leading*** us to a better place.
   4. Fix your eyes on ***Jesus***, your Good Shepherd.

**Transcript:**

Sometimes when I get on Facebook, I read the posts of some people, and I get really disturbed by some of the conspiracy theories I read. I have seen some posts who liken the American public to sheep. Those of us who agree with and try to follow the guidelines are compared to sheep; sheep being led down the path to some terrible and horrific end. Now do not get the wrong impression here; I am not saying that the things I have read and seen are false and I am not saying that they are true either. But what I am saying is that sheep are being given a bad reputation here. I never had a lot of respect for sheep as an animal, they are not usually aggressive; they are not handsome by any means; and if what I have read is correct, they are not very intelligent either. I have always been drawn to large powerful and smart animals.

I think most of the general population think much the same way. They see sheep as being weak, dumb, and generally only good for the wool they produce. Wait; do people even wear wool garments anymore? Needless to say, we do not have the same respect for sheep as we do for let’s say, a lion, a Belgian horse, a grizzly bear, or even your favorite dog or cat.

But as I look at our passages for this Sunday, I believe that we are underestimating the sheep. So as we look to the 23rd Psalm, let us try to get a better perspective on the sheep, and see if we really are like sheep, and better define who is leading us, and where we are being led to. Turn with me in your Bible to Psalms 23.

*Psalms 23:1-6 NRSV (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 right paths for his name's sake. (4)Even though I walk through the darkest valley, 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 goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.*

I read this week that “[T]here are some places in Scripture that are powerful, so deep, that to recite them is to experience them.” The 23rd psalm is one of those passages. The 23rd psalm is a very personal passage so much so that it moves people to tears when they hear it. One scholar states, “The psalm itself is a green pasture; the psalm itself is still water; the psalm itself restores my soul.”

Is it any wonder that songs are written about it? Is it a surprise that people use it as the message when we mourn the passing of loved ones? This passage is David's testimony, his personal experience with God. Pastors, myself included, come to this passage in a time of mourning so that we may help those in need of comfort, encouragement, and hope. It is precious to us, it is healing to our broken hearts and inspiration for our souls. Many cherish this passage as a constant friend that supports us in all of life. It possesses a simple beauty, it speaks of green pastures and still waters, it takes us through dark valleys, past our enemies and adversities.

But what comforts and helps us is the confidence we find in this psalm. David really believes all that he writes about God. We appreciate that what David writes is not poetic exaggeration or theoretical theology. He has experienced God in these ways, he has heard God’s voice, he has followed the Lord’s direction, he has known God’s care. And we find beneath the beauty of these words, solid convictions, formed in the experience of conflict and trials.

I only know these things about a man who lived 1000 years before Christ; because he has left us clues right here in this psalm. Notice that in the first three verses, David refers to God in the third person: "The Lord is my Shepherd. He makes me lie down… He leads me… He restores my soul." Then, in v. 4-5, David shifts, referring to the Lord in second person: "I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me… You anoint my head with oil." And then, he returns to the third person as he closes in verse 6; “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.”

Why does David switch from talking about God with 'He' to talking to God with 'You,' and why does it happen in v. 4? Why didn't he just go on to say, 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for He is with me; His rod and His staff, they comfort me'?"

Perhaps we find David becoming more intimate with the Lord as he talks. David begins by talking about God and transitions to talking with God; in verse 4 he describes the valley in which he has walked. He has felt the darkness of life and the shadows of death. David is talking about the crises in his life; crises of pain, of hope, of faith. And in those times, something very deep happens between David and God.

It’s in times like those that something deep happens between us and God as well. You've noticed it too, haven't you? We're more likely to talk about God when we are in the green pastures and more likely to talk to God when we're in the dangerous situation. In the light, we are susceptible to wander off pursuing greener grass. But in the dark, we cling to His knee. David changes from comments about God to communion with God because during these times in the valley, he stayed as close as possible to the Good Shepherd, never taking his eyes off Him. He experienced God in a way that ushered him to intimacy with the Good Shepherd. And might I add here my observation from Easter Sunrise service, “We cannot focus on the Son, when we are busy focusing on our self.”

We find ourselves these past few weeks in new territory, we find ourselves in a place of confusion, worry, concern for our wellbeing, and uncertainty for the days to come. Questions arise; will we catch this virus if we go out in public? Are we going to be able to get the groceries we need to survive? Are these rumors of conspiracies true? Are our rights being stripped away from us? Is this all just a ploy to fix the next election? We have heard all of the questions, but deep down in, are you worried? I am, I will not lie to you, in all my life and all of the things I have worried about in the past, the events of the past few weeks have me more worried and unsure about tomorrow than I have ever felt. But take heart, I am not so worried, so afraid that I am paralyzed with fear; like a sheep cornered by some ferocious predator. I stated a few weeks ago that I do not know the answers to this country’s questions, but ***I KNOW THE ONE WHO DOES*** and it is on Him that I rely.

So, allow me to invite you to a safe place where we can see that in this time of crisis. God is closer than you think. My prayer is that God will imprint His truth in your heart; that you will find your confidence in Him; confidence to rise above the storm clouds in your life, even as David did. Look closely and see David's confidence in times of crisis.

First, I want you to see that God allows us times in the valley. In the first four verses of Ps. 23, David takes the gentle picture of a shepherd with his sheep to describe the relationship God has with us and we can have with Him. Everything makes sense in our understanding of a shepherd leading his flock to green grass and calm waters. Then we in v. 4, things change and it doesn't fit. The valley of the shadow of death invokes images of dangerous situations where a sheep's life is in jeopardy unless the shepherd is alert and attentive.

But why would a sheep be going through such a place? Not because he strayed off in sin; that is not the point here, because the shepherd is pictured as going with the sheep not snatching him back to the pasture he left behind. No, the reason the sheep is going through the valley is because the shepherd leads him there. The connection between vs. 3 and 4 confirm this: The path through the valley is also one of the paths of righteousness in which God leads his sheep. "He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me..."

Now I am sure you may ask; why would a good shepherd; one who would lay down his life for his sheep; lead a lamb into a valley filled with danger and potential death? There's only one possible answer: "To get to some better place!" Philip Keller, an Australian shepherd, wrote a book called, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23. In it he writes, “The shepherd knows from past experience that predators… take cover in these broken cliffs and … prey on his flock.” The shepherd knows the hazards that lie within the valley, but he also knows the value of what lies on the other side.

When you're walking through some unfamiliar valley and the shadows linger… when you have cancer and have to decide whether it will be chemotherapy or some other treatment; or no treatment at all… when you're trying to decide as a matter of Godly stewardship whether to take your money out of the market or let it ride... when your finances are tight, and you are taking on yet another job to make ends meet, remember that the shepherd knows the peril that lies before you but has not brought you here that you may perish.

Every valley is pathway to something better. As Psalm 84:11 says, "No good does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly." Or as Paul put it, "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Rom . 8:28). The valley isn't good, but the Shepherd is. He knows the way. Next, you need to see that no matter what difficulty you face; the Shepherd has you covered. David tells us how to be fearless in adversity; even in the valley of the shadow of death, he didn't dread the distress he would face or cringe in the face of crisis.

How do you fight fear when you don't know what's going to happen next How do you fight fear when your imagination is working overtime? How did David do it? David tells us his confidence came from three sources:

*David did and we too must stay in God's presence.* “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.” He speaks of God's nearness and presence. When you step into your valley, and it's so dark you can't see the path ahead, the possibility that there are predators and enemies waiting for you; your Shepherd wants you to hear these words, “I will be with you. I am all you need to get through the valley. All you need is your Shepherd.” Hebrews 13:5b-6 says it like this: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

*David saw God's power, and we must be focused on what the Lord is doing so that we too may See God’s power.* A shepherd's rod was a two-foot club made of oak, with a rounded head that was whittled from the knot of the tree and had sharp bits of metal pounded into it. This club was used to defend the flock against attacks. It symbolizes the shepherd's power, wielded against overpowering enemies. David said he had no fear in adversity because of the comfort of God's power, protecting him from that which would ruin him. And you need not fear. Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world. (1 John 4:4).

*David experienced God's leading and you can experience God’s leading too.* Your staff… comforts me, he said. He was referring to the shepherd's crook, with its hook on one end. A good shepherd would use it to guide the sheep, lest they stray away. Just a gentle tap of the staff on a lamb's side would move them back in the fold. And the crook could gather up a sheep from a place where it might have fallen. David felt comforted that his Shepherd was guarding his steps, making sure that he makes it through the darkness safely.

David was supremely confident, confident in God’s grace that would see him all the way home in the future. He believed that valley times were appointed for His good. He learned things about God that were learned no other way than the deep ravines of life. He stayed close, trusted in God's protection and guidance all the way. All because he could say, "The Lord is my shepherd."

Today in closing I want to point out one more thing that is found in John 10:1-10. Jesus says, *“(1)Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. (2)The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. (3)The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (4)When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. (5)They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." (6)Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. (7)So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. (8)All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. (9)I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. (10)The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. John 10:1-10 NRSV*

I said earlier that sheep are given a bad rep for being unintelligent. And here is why; take note to what Jesus is saying about the sheep. The sheep know the shepherds voice and follow him because they know Him. The sheep do not follow a stranger, they run away because they do not know him.

Is the Lord your shepherd today? Do you know His voice? And are you listening? Are you following him as he speaks his words of love over you? Where is he leading you right now; the green pastures, beside still waters? Or are you traveling through the valley of the shadow of death?

Know if you are traveling a difficult path in these days that the Lord is with you, he will not leave you, if you will follow him. If you hear nothing else this day, hear this, “Jesus wants to be your shepherd; and He wants you to be His sheep.” But it requires you to trust in him, rely on him, and look to him when you need direction and help. There is only one way that this can be done, by learning the sound of His voice; You learn the sound of his voice by talking with him; telling him your hearts desire; listening to his words of love and life; listening to his words of instruction; listening to his words of correction; listening until his words become your words.

So, the question remains, “Are we sheep?” If the Lord is our Shepherd then we must be sheep, His sheep. We can walk without fear knowing that he walks by our side, guiding and protecting us, showing us the way, comforting us and encouraging us. Leading us through difficult times and places, like we are traveling through in these days of pandemic, COVID 19, and social distancing. Leading us to a better place where we will find green pastures to lie down in, and still waters to listen too. Leading to a better place, a place that he is preparing for His sheep; where he will anoint our heads and our cups will overflow, and we will be able to dwell with him forever and ever.

When you find yourself weak, in the dark, uncertain of the future. When all the color has drained out of life, and your soul is downcast, look up. Fix your eyes on Jesus, your Good Shepherd. Stick close to Him cling to his knee. Trust that He knows the way through this valley and will see you safely through. Believe that He has good reasons for taking this route, even though it is hard and unfamiliar. And hold on to the truth that there is something better waiting on the other side of this valley.