

Sermon Notes - August 30, 2020

"The Shepherd's Love and Care for Us"

(Psalm 23, John 10:11-18)

You will probably hear more about sheep today than you've ever heard before. How many of you ever grew up around sheep when you were a kid? Just one or two of you - and I did. We had about 100 sheep on our farm. I take a lot of what I'm going to share with you, not only from that experience, but from a book by Phillip Keller called "A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm." None of us like to be compared to sheep - but in the Old Testament it says, "The Lord is my shepherd," and it usually refers to God - because God referred to the Israelites as his flock or his sheep and God was their shepherd. Throughout their traveling through the wilderness, he provided food, water, guidance, and protection for them. In the New Testament, it says, "The Lord is my shepherd," and it usually refers to Jesus. We often say the Lord is God, the Lord is Jesus, and they are our shepherd.

Now, when did David write the 23rd Psalm? Most of us don't know and most scholars don't know whether he wrote it when he was a young man or an older man. Most scholars tend to believe that he wrote it in his old age and he was reflecting on his own years - as a young shepherd boy - and how he attended to the sheep.

I want you to know that sheep are kind of smelly and dirty. They are stubborn and hard-headed. They have a herd mentality - in other words, if you put out a trough of food, and the lead sheep does not eat, the rest of them won't eat either. They would starve to death first. They follow the herd mentality; they follow a crowd. They will wander off on their own. If they are looking for more food or greener grass, they will sometimes wander off and end up in a thicket or in a hole turned upside down. When they fall over and lay on their back, they cannot get up on their own. They have to have the shepherd come and, using the hook of his staff, pull them out of the bushes or out of the hole. Their circulation has gone down into their body and their legs get real weak, so when the shepherd puts them upright, he has to massage their legs and stimulate their circulation. He has to restore them to life.

The shepherd has several priorities.. 1. to know the sheep; 2. to provide for them and nurture them with food and water; 3. to protect them from

predators - lions, wolves, and bears; 4. to guide them in the right path so they'll stay on the path with the rest of the sheep - and if one gets lost, he goes after them to find them. So, the shepherd knows his sheep. Do you know that God knows you and me? The Bible says that before you were even born, God knew you - before you were knit in your mother's womb. It says he calls you by name. In the New Testament, Luke's gospel says that God knows every hair on your head. A shepherd knows his sheep and he names them. They may be "Blackie" or "Sleepy" or "Billy Bob" or whatever he has come up with. He knows those sheep. One of them has a clipped ear, one's got a spot on his left leg, one limps with the right leg, one's got a patch of wool that's not as thick on his back - he knows those sheep.

The sheep know his voice when he calls out to them. Each one has their own call. I heard about a sheep ranch in Australia where three different shepherds brought their sheep to this one farm so they could be sheared and the wool would be sold. All three sheep herds were put into the same fenced-in enclosure. One by one, they would have each shepherd to get in the corner of the fenced-in area and call his sheep. He would say something with his voice that his sheep knew - and it was said that all 100 of his sheep went to him as soon as he made that sound. The next one made his sound and his 100 went to him. The sheep know his voice and come to him. God knows our voice. Have you ever noticed that when your child calls you on the phone, you immediately know that's your child? That's your son or daughter and they know your voice. I'm amazed when I go into the nursery sometimes and see little babies when they hear their mom and dad talking at the door. Have you ever noticed that little kid will turn their head? They know mom's voice and dad's voice. The shepherd knows our name. He knows our voice. He knows everything about us.

The shepherd would provide and nurture those sheep. It says that, "He makes them to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth them beside the still waters." Did you know that sheep won't get into a mountain stream that's raging and fast-paced? They are afraid of falling because of their little legs and they'll get caught in the rocks - so they want still water, calm water. The shepherd will take them to a stream that is very still and calm or either he'll have water in a bucket for them to drink. He will take them to green pastures. Did you know that they will only lie down and sleep when their stomach is full? Did you know that sheep are not

natural born sleepers? We don't have any people that have trouble sleeping, do we? We sometimes don't sleep well, do we? Sheep will not go to sleep if they are hungry, if they are being aggravated by gnats or flies, or if there is a predator that they are worried about nearby. If they don't sleep, they lose weight and their wool is not as pretty.

Jesus wants to nurture us and feed us. He feeds us through prayer and through the scriptures and the Holy Spirit. He feeds us through other people. He restores us and renews our soul. When you come in from a hard day at work and you've had a bad day or a bad week, how do you want to renew your spirit and your body? Some of you will go out and play golf or have a night out with your spouse - some of you will take the kids and go to the park - some of you go shopping - some of you just take off and go to the beach or the mountains - but you want to refresh your body and mind. ***What he's saying in the scripture here is the best way to renew your soul and your spirit is to spend time in the presence of the Shepherd.*** A sheep feels the greatest and deepest calm when their shepherd is with them during the day and night. The shepherd protects them from the predators - the lions and the bears. He feeds them. When they fall in a hole and they get injured or hurt, he puts oil on them and heals their cuts and bruises and helps them. He pets them. Do you know that in ancient Palestine, they treated sheep almost like a family pet? They named them, played with them, kept them close to the home, and they were like a family pet. They sometimes kill them for meat, but mostly used them for wool to sell. So, sheep were special to them.

I think that it's odd that Jesus compares us to sheep - they are so dumb. Now, most of us wouldn't think of ourselves as dumb, would we? We are God's highest, intelligent creation - and yet, don't we make some dumb decisions? Don't we sometimes find ourselves in a hole - or lost or caught in a thicket or in a mess? Sometimes we fall into a hole and we don't know how to get out of it. It may be financial, emotional, marital, whatever - and we get in a mess and we wait for the Shepherd to come and get us out. Sometimes the only way we can come out of it is with God's help.

The shepherd is there to feed us, to water us, to nurture us, to protect us, and to provide for us. He leads us in the paths of righteousness - those ways of right relationships and values. He tries to guide us through the

Holy Spirit, the scriptures, prayer, and worship. He feeds us through communion.

God, the shepherd, is always there to take care of us. I heard a story from Dr. John Killinger, book author and Pastor who served a church in New York at one time. He told a story about a lady in his church that was a dancer in Broadway plays. He said that she was in a bad car accident and she broke her leg in several places. She had to be operated on, had a cast put on her leg, and they suspended her leg with pulleys and weights – and for weeks, she was immobilized. He went to see her after she'd been in the hospital for three weeks and asked her, "You are so active, dance and exercise every day. How are you dealing with all this immobility?" She said, "Pastor, I think I would have died, except for one thing – the 23rd Psalm. I mentally choreographed it in my brain. Two or three times a day, when I am frustrated and depressed about not being able to move, I mentally dance it in my head. It's beautiful and it gives me patience to wait."

When I was in my church in Florida, I had a lady in my church who said she had trouble sleeping at night. She said, "Miss Peggy, I've tried everything! I've tried hot tea, warm milk, taking melatonin. I just have trouble going to sleep." She said, "One night, I remembered something that a Pastor had told me about reading the 23rd Psalm. I started quoting the 23rd Psalm over and over. The next thing I knew, I fell asleep." A few days later, she had the same trouble falling asleep. She said, "I started quoting the scripture, prayed the Lord's Prayer, and went straight to sleep." God is that peace and calm that we need in our lives. Sheep only find peace and rest when their shepherd is there. ***We, too, find peace and calm in the presence of our Good Shepherd.***

There's something else that I want you to notice in that scripture: David said, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff comfort me." Don't we all go through periods of darkness in life? Sometimes it's pain – sometimes it's sorrow – sometimes we have to walk through death itself. But, saying "through," means there is another side – and we come out on the other side. It also reminds us that we have a constant companion, our Great Shepherd. He's always with us and he's going to walk through every step of the way with us.

A Pastor, who served a church outside of Chicago, tells a story about an elderly couple in his church who were going into Chicago to see their son and his wife. They drove in their truck and they forgot to fill the tank up with gas. All of a sudden, they are going down the road and realize they are about to run out of gas. The elderly man pulls off the side of the road and starts trying to flag somebody down on the road. Finally, this young man stopped and he said, "Sir, can I help you? Is there something wrong with your truck?" The elderly man said, "Yes, sir. I am about to run out of gas. Could you take my wife and I to the nearest gas station, let us get some gas, and bring us back?" He said, "Yes, sir. I'd be glad to - but how much gas do you have in your tank?" The elderly man turned the car back on and the young man looked at the tank. He said, "I tell you what, you and your wife get in your truck. You drive as far as you can and I'm going to follow right behind you. If you run out of gas, I will be there and I will take you to get gas and bring you back." He followed behind the man all the way to the gas station; he made it all the way without running out of gas. When he got to the gas station, the elderly man came back to the young guy and he said, "I just want to thank you. My wife and I felt such a comfort knowing that you were behind us and if anything happened, you were right there to help. ***It gave us such comfort and strength to know that you were right there if we needed it.***"

That's what God is with you and me. He's our constant companion in the ups and the downs - and right now, we need to be reminded of that more than any time. God is with us in the darkest times that we go through, whether it's with coronavirus, our economy - no matter what's going on in the world - God, our Good Shepherd, will walk through it with us. *He nurtures us. He guides us. He restores us. He renews us. He protects us. He provides for us. He's given us communion. He's given us the scriptures.* We have conversation with him. He knows us by name. He knows every hair on your head. He calls you by name. We are to learn his voice and trust him - just like those sheep know their shepherd and trust that he will provide, protect, and take care of them. They feel a peace and comfort and strength. ***As we get to know God better, trust him through all the circumstances of life, and realize that he is walking with us, we, too, will make it. God is with us this day and every day - our constant companion.***

We spend our young life accumulating things, possessions, houses, cars, boats, etc. Have you noticed that when people get older, they start trying to get rid of some of their junk? We want a smaller home or less stuff. King David, as an old man, could say, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," because as we get older, we realize that the most important things are our relationships with God and with family and with friends. David knew that God would provide what he needed - food, water, shelter. David knew what it was like to be in the presence of his enemies - he had King Saul and others who wanted to kill him. But God still took care of him. When he went through death or those times of darkness, he knew that God was with him. **I want to remind you today that God is our constant companion, our shepherd who loves and cares for us, and He will see us through.**

There's a man, I read about, who was a Pastor and he had colon cancer. He was diagnosed with Stage 3½ and was given a 50-50% chance to live. He said, "I went home and told my wife and kids. And I had faith in God that he would see me through - whether it was home in heaven or home here on earth with them. I asked them to pray and my friends and my church family. The most important thing was knowing that the Good Shepherd was with me every step of the way as I went through surgery, chemo, and radiation. God was with me."

I pray that each of us will know the Good Shepherd loves and cares for us. He nurtures us. He walks with us - no matter what is happening in our lives. With God on our side, we can go through anything. May God bless us. Amen.