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Greetings in the name of the Lord!

I apologize for the inconvenience of our technical difficulties on Sunday. I found out Monday that Zoom basically had a meltdown worldwide on Sunday. Please continue to log on via landline, mobile, or computer. It is so important we continue to worship 'together', as much as we can. The sermon is below, along with the announcements most of you could not hear.

We continue to concentrate on Psalm 23. Sunday's sermon focus was on verse 4.

\*If you would like to see everyone you are worshipping with, use the setting of 'gallery view' in the upper right hand corner of your computer screen. If you want to see the worship service choose speaker view, you can click onto that setting at the top right.

\*There have been a few questions whether we will Zoom after we are able to return to having a service together. YES, we will continue Zooming together for worship and meetings, since there are many who will not be able to meet with us in person.

\*We thank you for your continued stewardship for the life, work, and ministry of our church. Our special mission for this and next month, of over and beyond, is our Food Pantry. We have received \$445.00 so far towards our \$1800.00 2 month goal.

\*We send our congratulations and prayers out to the Indian Lake Seniors who are graduating today!

\*Let us begin our worship. Will you pray with me?

**Opening Prayer** – O Lord, bless us as we gather together this morning. We pray for those who are graduating and their families. We ask that you give us patience as we await the opportunity of coming back together in person. So, for today, during in this time of worship, let us hear again your words of comfort, care, and love. We praise you that we are never alone and we are yours. Amen.

## **Psalm 23 - (King James Version, from the year 1611 ) Verse 4**

Each of us, at some point - and some, regretfully, many times - have felt dejected, down cast, depressed, hopeless, or find ourselves in the depths of despair. When we experience any of these, our first impulse is to flounder in our pain and be stuck, yet when we call out to Jesus, he raises us up, he restores us, and gets us back on our feet, much in the same way a shepherd recues a 'cast down' sheep.

'Cast down' is an old English shepherd's term for a sheep that has turned over on its back, and not able to get up by itself. Its feet are frantically pawing in the air, struggling to stand up, with no success. Sometimes the sheep bleats for help, but generally it lies there struggling in frustration. Many of us do the same thing when we are 'out of sorts.' So you know it is imperative the shepherd lifts you up out of depths of despair, to restore you.

For sheep, this often happens when a fat, pregnant, or heavily fleeced sheep lies down in a depression, in the ground. Then when a sheep rolls on its side slightly, and then stretches out to relax, suddenly the center of gravity takes over, and they are partially on their back. The sheep starts kicking frantically in the air, making the situation worse, because their reaction causes them to roll over further, squarely on their back, making it impossible for them to get back up on their feet. Think of beetles on their back in the summer.

As the sheep lie there, gases begin to build up in the stomach, cutting off blood circulation to the legs. If the sheep is in the sun, on a hot day, it will likely die in just a few hours. If it's cooler, cloudy, or rainy, the sheep can survive for several days, unless a predator finds them before the shepherd gets there. In the 'Parable of the Good Shepherd', in Matthew 18, Jesus told the story of a shepherd who left 99 sheep to go and find the one lost one. Those listening to Jesus, back then, understood how critical it was to locate the sheep, and restore it to its feet.

A few weeks ago, I was brushing our golden retriever on the front porch. As I brushed her back haunches and long silky tail - which she hates - she kept scooting back a bit. I warned her, 'if you keep that up, you're gonna' fall off the porch.' And then, with one more squirm, and gravity took over. She was on her back, feet up in the air, in the flower bed, with the porch wall on one side and a bush on the other, on top of my irises.

At nearly 100 lbs., I wasn't able to just bend down and pick her up, so I told her to roll over and get up. The second time I said it she finally heard my voice and stopped panicking. Fortunately dogs can roll over, although harder for the larger ones. And after some squirming and maneuvering, she was up, and at the door, ready to go in. I wanted to finish brushing her,

so when I tried, she flinched and backed away. She thought falling off the porch was the brush's fault. Yet she's not the only one who attaches unfounded meaning to a consequence of their actions. We do it too, and often blame God.

A woman came up to me, years ago, at an event, after I had taught 'we are forgiven for our sin, yet there may be human consequences.' God broke through her decades of pain. With this new understanding, she was released from her spiritual prison, she had put herself in. She had been convinced that, for over 35 years, she couldn't get pregnant because God was punishing her for an abortion, when in the 1960's there was less expertise in the procedure.

Discovering God had not punished her, all those years, changed the very essence of her very being. Her face glowed. She was filled with great joy to know God never left or forsake her. She realized it wasn't God, but likely the medical procedure that kept her from becoming pregnant. That night, 35 years of walking through the valley of the shadow of death, ended.

There are many people who think - when bad things happen to them, it is God's fault. Someone told them, somewhere along the line that God gets frustrated, disgusted, fed-up, and even furious at people for what they've done, and God pays them back.

At a previous church, there was a woman at a wedding reception that told one of the young children, who was running around, being a kid, "Keep that up, and God's gonna' get shu!" I intervened. What a brutal idea of God. How awful. How hurtful for a child to hear such a teaching when they should be learning how much God loves them. I can't imagine how many people have been taught, when a person sins, God will get you, penalize you, hurt you, and even punish you? Jesus taught us differently, because that's not how God works.

When we sin, Jesus forgives us, if we've asked; however he will not necessarily get us out of the civil repercussions we've earned, when we do something illegal. He'll likely use our time-out experience as a way to reconnect to him. God can work in and through whatever poor choices we make.

Last fall, a staff person at a church in Westerville was caught embezzling over \$200,000, as a result of her gambling addiction. Jesus will forgive her, if she's asked. However, when the trial is over, she will be a guest in the Marysville Women's Reformatory for a number of years. That's a civil punishment. Societal punishment is when people have little empathy over a situation and say, "Well, they got what they deserved." Yet God still works in and through the woman's situation, and even in ours.

When we sin, no matter what we did, we've also sin against God. It's like a death, when we realize it. That's why we get anxious and struggle with why and what we did. In regards to

some sins we've committed, we might hate ourselves, not forgive ourselves, convinced God would never take us back, even after years of praying for forgiveness. Yet Jesus forgives when we ask.

The promise is, if we change our ways, ask for forgiveness - - we will receive it – and our sin will be washed away, by Jesus' blood. Through this forgiveness, we are made anew, and how we live our life changes. However, the parts we don't enjoy are the human consequences; but rest assured, through it all, God will never leave us or forsakes us.

Jesus said, if you fall down, are cast down, lost in sin, or are filled with sorrow, he, the Good Shepherd, will come running after you, calling your name, until you turn around and realize you are found. Regretfully, it often takes years for us to listen, turn around and accept his help. Yet Jesus continues to call to us, like a shepherd who is looking for his cast down sheep. We are so fortunate that our Good Shepherd is with us, and we lie down and rest, knowing that 'Even when I walk through the valley of death I will fear no evil, because God is with me.'

Usually when we hear, "walking through the valley of the shadow of death," we think about an approaching death. As these words come to mind, or are read, those facing death relax and become peace-filled. These words give them an assurance that Jesus is there. It restores them, as those same words restore us. For the same Lord, who is my shepherd, according to Matthew 1, is Jesus, 'Emmanuel, God with us.' The Lord God, through Jesus Christ cares, sustains, and protects us.

In our scripture for today, we find, "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Both are implements of particular purpose. The rod is like a club that is whittled and carved to fit the person's hand. It's a weapon of defense for himself and his sheep. The rod could be used as a club, thrown for a direct hit, or thrown to off to the side to dissuade, or scare sheep away from poisonous plants, a dangerous place, or from wandering off, and defensively to protect the shepherd.

A shepherd's staff is specifically shaped for the needs of shepherding sheep. A shepherd could use his staff to gently lift a newborn lamb that has become separated from its mother, so no human odor would be on the lamb, otherwise the mother may reject her offspring. A shepherd could use the staff to reach out and grab an individual lamb in danger, or to bring it close to them, to tend or examine. God's rod signifies protection. His staff draws us close to him for love and care. The Good Shepherd is attentive, caring, and aware of our needs, and is with us, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:20)

So today's verse, 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou are with me,' proclaims we have a powerful, comforting, caring and protecting shepherd, that loves us. We do not have to worry about our life or our death; when we trust the Lord, our Good Shepherd. In Isaiah 41, the prophet proclaims these timeless words from God: "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; and cause you to stand." - That's another scripture we can memorize, to remind us of God's promises through our trials and tribulations.

For those who have not, or struggle to memorized scripture, or don't have a Bible at hand, you can hear scripture sung, 24 hours a day, by listening to and singing along to Christian music, of all styles. Music reminds us, over and over again of God's promises and God's Word. Some of the songs we've known for decades, others are relatively new, waiting for us to memorize, so we can remember, in all circumstances, that God never leaves us.

Contemporary singer and songwriter, Kari Jobe sings this promise in her song, *I Am Not Alone*:

When I walk through deep waters; I know that You will be with me;  
When I'm standing in the fire; I will not be overcome;  
Through the valley of the shadow; I will not fear  
I am not alone. I am not alone; You will go before me. You will never leave me. (repeat)

In the midst of deep sorrow; I see Your light is breaking through;  
The dark of night will not overtake me; I am pressing into You.  
Lord, You fight my every battle; Oh, and I will not fear.  
I am not alone. I am not alone. You will go before me. You will never leave me (Repeat)

You amaze me. Redeem me. You call me as Your own. (Repeat)  
You're my strength. You're my defender.  
I am not alone. I am not alone. You will go before me. You will never leave me (Repeat)

<https://praisecleveland.com/1972920/kari-jobe-explains-story-behind-i-am-not-alone - lyrics video>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfveawSAHJA> – live video

Music reminds us of God's presence, forgiveness, love, grace, mercy, and power when we need it the most. I encourage you to listen to the style of Christian music that uplifts you, restores you, and helps you to stand. Our local Christian contemporary radio station is found at 88.5 & 88.9, and on your computer at <https://shinefmohio.com>. You can also listen on your cell phone to that station or download the free Pandora app and search: Christian music and select your favorite style.

I feel my best when I am reminded throughout my day that I am not alone, that I am loved, forgiven, restored. I love it when I hear, 'I am yours, and you are mine.' May it be so for you. Amen.

**Benediction** - I've always loved the image of Jesus carrying a lamb in his arms, seen in the stained glass windows of churches. Yes, God picks us up and carries us when we cannot walk ourselves, however God is greater than just picking us up and holding us in his arms. He is our protector, sustainer, healer, redeemer, friend, Savior, and more, as the musical group 'Unspoken' claims in their refrain of '*You Have Always Been*':

You've been my Savior, Sustainer, when I'm at my end;  
My Healer, Redeemer, again and again;  
My Mother and my Father, Brother, Sister, and Friend.  
Everything I've needed Lord, You've always been  
Everything I've needed Lord, You've always been **(Repeat it with me)**  
Everything I've needed Lord, You've always been.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7vsjQo2NYY> – official music video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IFoutAn9w0> – lyrics video

Enjoy listening to Christian music! Have a blessed week! Amen.

*Blessings! Pastor Debbie*