

Text: Psalm 23 (Easter 4, Series B, April 25, 2021)

Theme: Enjoy in Sheep-like Serenity.

Virtue (basic truth): Our contentment rests in the goodness and grace of our Savior-Shepherd.

Malady (our problem): Sin's irritations and distractions deprive us of Shepherd-confidence.

Telic Note (goal): By means of this sermon, the Spirit of Grace delights our hearts to realize just how good and restful it is to be a sheep in the Shepherd's care.

Propositional Statement (aim): Songs sing of idyllic rest and refreshment – and, sometimes, we enjoy that. For a while. But the vacation ends, and reality sets in. Except for Christians who get to *enjoy sheep-like serenity* because we know the care of our Good Shepherd.

Specific Law in Text: implied in our need for a Shepherd and propensity to wander from him.

Specific Gospel in Text: “the LORD is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1).

Doctrinal Thought: the God of free and faithful love maintains his shepherding role over us.

Sanctification Thought: *“God of free and faithful love, in bold grace you blessed me to be a sheep in your care. Thank you! So often, LORD, I forget the rest and contentment found in you alone. Restore my soul in the joy of your goodness; and, as you bring me closer, strengthen me to be content in you love and grace forever. In your name I pray. Amen!”*

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ 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.

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 love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

It's wonderfully relational: He's the *Savior*, we're the *saved*; he's the *Redeemer*, we're the *redeemed*; he's the *Shepherd*, we're the *sheep* – and his love is ours! Alleluia and Amen!

Nine months into our Florida adventure, here's the increasingly evident perception: not every day is a Jimmy Buffet song-like experience.

Thanks for that bummer of a sermon-start, Stern! Bleak, I know; but you know it, too. Turns out, life in the sunshine state isn't just fun and sun, sand and sunsets. Don't get me wrong, some days are that – and they really are nice. But not every day is; and not for everybody. For some people, yes, most of life here is pretty good! For others, barely tolerable. For some, not a worry in the world. For others, worry is all that fills their world. Some do get to rest and to get away. Others, though – you know this! – lie awake because they can't do either. Even here! Some live a vacation on the water. For others, it's all to do to keep their head above the water. Sunshine? Yeah – most days across the state. Serenity? Not by a long-shot ... not even for the majority.

To be clear, though, lest I sound like disillusioned tourist, that's true everywhere. Not every Colorado day was melodic with *Michael Franti*. Not every Minnesota minute was in time with *Wookiefoot*. And I'd bet not every island instance found its way into a *Bob Marley* ballad. Regardless of the wonderland in which we exist, we realize: it's one thing to sing of serenity; it's an entirely different thing to be able to enjoy it perfectly, completely, contentedly and, freely.

Here's why: because imperfection is both all around us and is within us. Spiritual terms, it's called *sin* – evidence something's off, reason something's wrong, proof something's broken, problem that most people are trying to get away from – or at least listen to something to help not think about it. So we try to our mind off the bleak reality, but sun and sand don't alleviate the problem. So we try to live a luxury to help us ignore the misery, but misery is content to wait for us to get back. So we assume we can avoid imperfection if we look better, work harder, recreate more, spend less, save more, or vacation farther, but none of that undoes sin. So maybe Buffet drank the wrong stuff, Marley was in the wrong place, Franti set the wrong pace, Wookiefoot lived in the wrong space! Or...they all sang about something they craved: serenity enjoyment.

Nice as it is to hear musicians and their melodies, Holy Spirit put it on the heart of King David to give us a better song. And, it's a melody which, by the grace of God, lets us *enjoy sheep-like serenity*. That song – Psalm 23 – is our focus today. Here's how we'll go about it: so much depth in these 6 quick verses that we won't be able to exhaust it all in the next 10 or so minutes; so, we'll look at the song in three sections and then sing the verses together. Sound ok? Good.

For starters, realize that most songs blend some type of reason and reality. Psalm 23 does that, too – but it doesn't just stop with that, it moves on to give us role and result as well. Listen:

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:1-3)

- **Reality:** *“Not I am deprived.”* Serenity floods life physically, emotionally, spiritually.
- **Reason:** *“LORD, my Shepherd”* – the God of free and faithful love owns a responsibility
- **Role:** shepherd makes me lie down, leads, restores, guides
- **Result:** the Shepherd is glorified, and the sheep has serenity.

Look closely at that section – there’s nothing about *cheeseburgers in paradise*; there’s nothing that even says the sheep eats or drinks – but it’s existence is tranquility because of the Shepherd. Contentment and confidence because *for his name’s sake*, our Shepherd is faithful. Let’s sing it.

The Lord’s my Shepherd; I’ll not want. He makes me down to lie. In pastures green; he leadeth me the quiet waters by. He leadeth me, he leadeth me the quiet waters by.

My soul he doth restore again and me to walk doth make. Within the paths of righteousness, e’en for his own name’s sake. Within the paths of righteousness, e’en for his own name’s sake.

Most songs have some type of hook – a phrase, a riff, a refrain that sticks, and that helps us remember later on – maybe not the whole song, but an important part. And sometimes, in Hebrew songs, that focus is put right in the middle for emphasis. See if you can hear it:

“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” (Psalm 23:4).

- **Root:** serenity point David wants to get across: “you are with me” – there’s our comfort!
- **Ramification:** even when shadows seem scary, we have a special comfort.
- **Representation:** rod and staff were the Shepherd’s tools – a rod/club to keep predators away, or to correct wayward sheep, a staff to collect and corral his flock.

Here’s the song’s refrain: we *enjoy sheep-like serenity* because the Shepherd-LORD is faithful and is with us; moreover, he has a tool of curb and correction – his Law, by which he protects us and corrects us; and a tool of comfort – his Gospel, by which he draws us close! And look at the difference that makes! Because he’s with us in his love, and because he’s the One leading – which means he knows where he’s taking us, we have nothing to fear – not dark shadows, death valley, evil or the consequence of our sinful imperfection. That too, we get to sing about. Let’s!

Yea, though I walk in death’s dark vale, yet will I fear no ill; for thou art with me, and thy rod and staff me comfort still. For thou art with me, and thy rod and staff me comfort still.

Sounds obvious, but there's a point where every song ends. And that's one of the interesting things about living in a vacation state – vacation ends and it's back to reality. That doesn't have to be abysmal, but we know that a vacation-like serenity doesn't endure forever. Except...

“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 love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23:5, 6).

- **Regality:** in OT times, the king was viewed as a shepherd, so the mesh of sheep-like serenity that ends in a royal banquet isn't a mixed metaphor.
- **Reward:** enjoyment of blessings, even with enemies around – as well as! – blessings beyond deserving, culminating the goodness of God and the love of God that don't leave us when the vacation is over. AND
- **Rest:** for how long? In the house of the LORD ... forever.

Friends, I don't want to give you the false notion that life as a sheep in the care of the Good Shepherd is somehow easy, or that every-day is a lie in the meadow by a slow-moving brook; or, to force a fit into our illustration: life is supposed to be a vacation. The reality is that some-days are that, and we do have that. Amazing! But not every-day is that, so what are we supposed to make of Psalm 23 – is David just like Jimmy, Bob, Michael and the band...or not?

Remember the focus? It's not that life is easy, or that every-day if we do things right is meant to be an island-tune or reggae melody...it's that our Shepherd is with us. On the good days. On the not so good days. On the easy days. On the not so easy days. In our life. In our death. Here. Now. Everyday. There. Then. All Eternity. We get to *enjoy sheeplike serenity*.

Would you please stand and help me sing that truth with a smile? The last two stanzas:

My table thou hast furnished in presence of my foes; My head thou dost with oil anoint, And my cup overflows. My head thou dost with oil anoint, and my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy, all my life shall surely follow me, and in God's house forevermore my dwelling place shall be. And in God's house forevermore my dwelling place shall be.

Amen!