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Message for September 29, 2019
“Life Songs: Our Shepherd”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Psalm 23

The deal about nightingales is that they sing their best right before the dawn. That is another way to say that they sing their best when the night is at its darkest.

There are times in life when it seems as though the night will never end, the dawn seems long in coming.

You and I get pressed that way every now and then. Circumstances can get the best of us and when they do it can seem like there is no end in sight.

Into that mix comes a passage like the 23rd Psalm.

Henry Ward Beecher once wrote *that “the 23rd Psalm is the nightingale of all Psalms for it sings sweetest when the night is at its darkest.”*

That’s why of all the Psalms it is one of the most read, even one of the most memorized of all scripture.

Christianity Today did a study some years back, asking the question, “Which Bible verses are searched for most often in the world’s ten most populous countries?” Psalm 23 appeared in the top five in nine of the ten countries.

That happens to be the case because we live in a broken, fallen world and a passage like Psalm 23 speaks to the most basic of our frailties.

Psalm 23 informs our deepest needs with a re-assuring word about the leadership of God and his every desire to be help us make it through whatever we it is we are facing.

Upon reading Psalm 23 we are awakened to God’s presence. We realize God is at the center of things, even those things that have to do with us. At once, we are reminded of God’s care and concern.

- In the care of our Lord, we shall not want.
- God gives us permission to lie down and rest from it all.
- He leads us to the still waters of peace and contentment. And in that, our souls are restored.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads 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;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever. (Psalm 23)*

Years ago I ran across a wonderful book on the 23rd Psalm written by Philip Keller who himself was a shepherd. Keller helps us see the 23rd Psalm through the eyes of a shepherd.

He also gives us a good glimpse into the comings and goings of the sheep.

Keller makes this point early on in his book, *“Obviously in writing the 23rd Psalm, David is speaking not as a shepherd, but as a sheep. He speaks with a strong sense of pride and devotion. It is as if David is shouting aloud, ‘Hey look at who my shepherd is, he is the Lord.’”* Phillip Keller

A little girl in reciting the 23rd Psalm began by saying, *“The Lord is my shepherd; that’s all I want.”* She might have missed on the wording, but she sure got the theology right.

Two men were called on to recite the 23rd Psalm to a large crowd. One was a trained orator and the other not nearly as accomplished, but full of faith.

The orator recited the psalm powerfully and when he was finished he received a standing ovation. The more humble of the two repeated the same words but instead of an ovation, the people simply sat in an attitude of devotion and prayer.

Afterward the orator stood and said, *“I have a confession to make. The difference between what you have just heard from my friend and what you have heard from me is this: I know the Psalm, my friend knows the Shepherd.”*

To have God as the shepherd of our lives lends a certain confidence to life. With him leading us we find ourselves well-nurtured, our needs are well-taken care of, and we are well-protected.

I've been repeating the 23rd Psalm quite often these days, day and night.

Every time I run through this great Psalm, the Lord emphasizes something new I need to hear in that particular moment.

"I shall not want," might come through one time, where *"he makes me to lie down in green pastures"* might another.

We had said right out of the gate that the Psalms are for the whole of life. That's certainly true for the 23rd Psalm.

The Sheep of His Pasture

Let's talk about sheep just a bit and in talking about sheep, let's realize we're actually talking about ourselves.

Sheep have earned the reputation of not being the brightest bulb in the barn or shall I say the pasture.

Sheep have been branded as not very smart.

Sheep are characteristically not very independent. They can't defend themselves. They are neither strong nor brave. They can't even work up a good stampede. Usually, they just sort of meander. Sheep without a shepherd will get lost every time.

The interesting thing about sheep is that they have a tendency to follow. Unlike cattle, who move along by being driven, sheep tend to follow their shepherd. In those instances when they don't, they usually get in some sort of trouble.

We'd do well to hear that. It's always good to follow the leader when it comes to our relationship with God.

You can see it throughout the Holy Land, shepherds leading their sheep.

I like the story told of the pastor who was leading a Holy Land trip who told those with him that shepherds always lead their sheep. They never drive them.

As things would have it, the group came upon a shepherd and his sheep, but instead of the shepherd leading them from the front, he was driving them from the rear.

The pastor called out to the shepherd and asked him what he was doing. *“Oh I’m not the shepherd, I’m the butcher.”*

All such stories aside, sheep really will follow their shepherd wherever he leads them. Interestingly, they are not even distracted by another shepherd.

If you move three flocks into a field and place the three shepherds of those three flocks at three strategic points and have each one issue a call, the sheep will sort themselves out. Every sheep follows his/her shepherd.

There is a note there for us. It comes to us to figure out who our shepherd is and follow him. In all that vies for our time and attention, it is easy to be distracted.

We’d do well to settle on God as the shepherd of our lives and follow him without fail.

The Work of the Shepherd

Let’s talk about the shepherd for just a bit, after all, that’s where our focus needs to be.

The 23rd Psalm is quite expressive at this point and Keller is right, the focus of the Psalm is not on the sheep, but on the shepherd.

Just look at some of the things the shepherd does.

- The shepherd makes the sheep lie down in green pastures. There they will find a place of peace and contentment. They will find there all they need. God makes us to lie down in those same green pastures as hurried and as distracted as we are sometimes.
- The shepherd leads the sheep beside still waters. In an arid land cool, refreshing water means life, pure and simple. We are encouraged these days to stay well-hydrated. It has been unseasonably hot. Without water, we’ll find ourselves parched in short order. So it is when we stray from the One who seeks to offer *“living water”* through his Son.
- The shepherd is careful to guide the sheep along paths that are straight and true. God’s every desire is to lead us along *“paths of righteousness.”*
- The shepherd will make sure the sheep are well-sustained, even if they find themselves in *“the valley of the shadow of death.”* Because the shepherd is leading them they know they don’t have any reason to be afraid. And if life’s darkest days should befall us, we too can move through them because of God’s leadership.

God’s *“rod and staff”* has a way of comforting us. His correction assures us that he is fast at work to keep us close to him.

I love the image of the rod and staff. The rod was used to correct the sheep and keep them moving along. The staff was used to grab a sheep when that sheep got too far off the beaten track.

God knows, we are in need of being corrected every now and then. God is not above retrieving us when we stray.

God loves us that much.

I Shall Not Want

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

I pray you are living into that reality each and every day.

Jesus in commenting on the multitude that gathered right before the Feeding of the 5000 said, *“They are like sheep without a shepherd.”* (Mark 6:34)

May it not be said of us.

Jesus knew how important it was for them to be led rightly and he was the very one to do it.

“I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says in John 10:14. *“I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as my Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.”*

Jesus was willing to go to great lengths to prove his love for us, even if that meant his own death on the cross.

Jesus goes to great lengths, even to this day. He meets us in our hour of need. He refreshes us when we need to be sustained. He protects us when evil lurks around the edges of our lives.

In Luke 15:3-7, Jesus talks about the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine in order to retrieve the one. He is all about that with you and me.

“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” (Luke 15:7)

I can't tell you how many times I have read the 23rd Psalm during someone's funeral. It seems to speak where other attempts at speaking fall woefully short.

Let's let the Psalm speak for itself. In the next few moments take the opportunity to read it through. What is God saying to you? How is God moving? And what are you going to do about it?