

Psalm 23

Good Shepherd Sunday - May 3, 2020



Introduction and Welcome

Call to Worship:

Jesus, the Good Shepherd calls us to worship together today. Even though we are not all in one space, Jesus is with us wherever we are and cares for us in whatever situation we find ourselves. Let us join in worshiping our God and giving thanks for the presence of our Savior.

Reading the Word: John 10:1-10

Jesus the Good Shepherd

“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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Message: “The Good Shepherd” – Rev. Dr. Deb Hanson

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Psalm 23:1

Psalm 23 is probably the most well known Psalm in the Bible. Most of the time, we use it in funeral services because it brings so much comfort to people. But this Psalm is powerful for any time of the year and any occasion because it names our fears, encourages us to trust God, and leads us to hope.

This Sunday is called Good Shepherd Sunday, and, in addition to Psalm 23, the gospel lesson is John 10:1-10 when Jesus talks about being the shepherd who is the gate for the sheep. He is the gate through which we, his followers find our way because he leads us. So, in Psalm 23 and in John 10, we have images of a shepherd who cares about the sheep, who watches over them, protects them, leads and guides them.

As I sat at my desk pondering these two passages that are so familiar and that appear every year during this time for “Good Shepherd Sunday,” I stared at the blank screen for a long time. Finally, I asked myself, “What does it mean to you, Deb, for Jesus to be your shepherd? And what does Psalm 23 mean for you?”

Where does one begin to answer such fully loaded questions? I guess, for me, it would be to reflect on when I first realized that Jesus loved me. Many of us learned the song, “Jesus Loves Me” at an early age. (sing “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.”

Last week, I spoke about how my understanding of God’s forgiveness and my own salvation began to move from my head to my heart when I was sixteen. In the song, “Jesus Loves Me,” we hear that the Bible is tells me so, but again, that understanding of God’s love in Christ eventually needs to move from our heads to our hearts.

Sometimes that happens when we recognize that God is with us in all that we do. Maybe it happens when we have headed down a path that takes us away from God, focusing solely on our own needs and desires. Somehow, the Shepherd finds us and calls us back. Yet, even when we stray, God watches over us and keeps nudging us to return to following our Shepherd because he knows the way; he knows what is best for us; and he knows the path.

Jesus calls himself “the gate.” Whoever follows him will find their way through the gate to life in Christ, to beginning to understand the fullness of God’s love for us. We may all do it in different ways, but eventually, we find the way that leads us to life in Christ, a life of faith that becomes our foundation for who we are and how we live in this challenging world.

Psalms 23 speaks of going through the valley of the shadow of death, and we face that shadow every day of our lives in some way or another. It may be when a loved one dies, when a relationship ends, when we lose our job, or our health, or when a friend rejects us, or we go through a difficult time.

The Psalm reminds us that the Shepherd is with us, providing for us, caring for us, watching over us, and loving us, even in the darkest shadows. We are in the midst of a pandemic that can be very frightening. Yet, I see signs of God’s hand in our world in so many ways: people expressing their gratitude to medical workers, grocery clerks, and other essential workers who continue to care for us.

I have seen more kindness and expressions of compassion, showing concern for others in our towns, country, and world. That is the gate that Jesus opens for us to enter, and it is part of our calling as his followers - to be part of making a difference for others.

So, to answer the questions I asked “What does it mean for Jesus to be my Shepherd and what does Psalm 23 mean to me?” I would say that it means that I can trust God to bring good out of bad, that even though we may be walking through what seems like a dark valley right now, we aren’t ever alone

Psalms 23 speaks of going through the valley of the shadow of death, and we face that shadow every day of our lives in some way or another. It may be when a loved one dies, when a relationship ends, when we lose our job, or our health, or when a friend rejects us, or we go through a difficult time. It means that I have a companion on my journey, as we all do, in the Good Shepherd who leads us and guides us, and walks with us, and even sometimes carries us when we are too weak to walk on our own. It means that God will not abandon us, but help us to find ways to keep going and eventually bring us to a new place of renewal. There is the hope. There is a love far greater than any we can even imagine.

So, my friends, know that you are blessed with the presence of the Good Shepherd, as well as many people who are on this journey together. We can draw strength from each other and from our God, because, as Jesus said in the last verse of the John 10 passage, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Hymn: Savior, like a shepherd lead us, much we need thy tender care;
In thy pleasant pastures feed us, for our use thy folds prepare.
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast bought us, thine we are.
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast bought us, thine we are.

Early let us seek thy favor, early let us do thy will;
Blessed Lord and only Savior, with thy love our bosoms fill.
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast loved us, love us still.
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast loved us, love us still.
Amen.

Prayer:

Loving Shepherd, you watch over us and teach us about living life the way you would have us live. We follow you because we trust your guidance and direction in our lives. Even though we stray at times, you seek us out and call us back to be with you and each other. In this time of being apart, we know that you are with us wherever we are and that you bind us together with a love we can't even comprehend. Your wish is for us to have life abundantly, and there are times when we may struggle to see that happening, so open our eyes and hearts to count our blessings, to see your presence in the lives of others as well as in our own lives. Thank you for all you have given us and for the gift of life in you. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Liturgy for a Love Feast

“Comfort Food: A Feast of Love” designed by Dr. Marcia McFee

When we “break bread” together as a church in our worship, we remember that Jesus invited folks to his table as part of his ministry, not just at the Last Supper. So we wanted to reflect on a ways we break bread together in our homes and think of the foods you bring to the table whether you eat alone or with family. This is often called a “Love Feast”.

Jesus used the parable of a great banquet to which all people are invited in order to talk about what the “kin-dom” of God, the family of God, looks like. He said, “Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled.” He often invited the most unlikely guests to his meal-times, confounding the disciples.

In this way, he was encouraging a deep love and connection beyond social norms. He knew that we humans need connection and inclusion. Jesus comforts us, saying “you have a place at the table” and Jesus challenges us to make sure we are doing the same—that all people know they are welcome in our hearts, in our homes, in our churches— even if we can’t physically be with each other right now.

It is difficult in this moment not to be near some of the people we love and might be worried about. Take a moment to name those people you wish were right there next to you at your table today.

Jesus is no longer physically on earth, yet every time we gather around a table and we call him to mind, he is present with us in Spirit. And so too, our loved ones are with us. Let this be a comfort to us.

We also want to call to mind, the people we cannot name, whose names we do not know. But we know they need our prayers and God’s comfort.

For those who have lost loved ones

For those who are sick and recovering

For those who are caring for loved ones who are sick at home For those who are caring for persons in medical care

For those who are separated from loved ones

For those who are feeling alone and isolated

For those who are helping and are so very tired

For those who are struggling to find friends, food, and comfort For those who are afraid

I invite you to take a deep breath on behalf of all those we do not know and cannot call by name. As we do so, we know that God knows who needs our prayers and the Spirit, Breath of God, is blowing from within us outward as a Spirit of Compassion and Presence.

Blessings at the table are part of our Judeo-Christian heritage. Indeed, Jesus adapted his Jewish ritual blessing spoken before and after meals. He asked us to remember him whenever we break bread and raise a cup in thanksgiving. This is why we call our communion prayers the “Great Thanksgiving.” In this feast of love and comfort, we can call to mind things for which we are deeply grateful. I invite you to think of a couple of things that you are grateful for in this moment.

And so I invite you to raise a plate or cup of “something” on your table, and let us bless it as we hold this food or cup in our hands or have it next to us on the table.

Holy Comforter

We gather in your name...

invited by Jesus...

bound together with your Spirit...

in union with each other...

Feed our bodies and our spirits...

with your comforting presence...

so that we might be your comfort to others...

Bless this food...

and break open our hearts... Bless this drink...

and pour out your love... Amen...

As you hold your cup or eat a meal today, I invite you to imagine what extravagant love looks like as you reach across the social distance to loved ones, to friends, and even acquaintances or strangers.

And now may you shelter not only in place, but in peace. May the peace and comfort of Christ be present with you now and forevermore. Amen.

Blessing

Psalm 23

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. 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 they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.