

June 21, 2020

Do Not Fear: The Lord is My Shepherd

Psalm 23

I believe that out of all the Psalms, Psalm 23 is probably the most well-known and recognized Psalms and maybe even passages of the bible. And not just for Christians or church goers but most people in general know or have at least heard Psalm 23.

It has been quoted in movies, heard in songs, read in books. Etched on plaques, printed on posters, and sewn into the fabric of culture along with so many of those lovely throw pillows.

And perhaps what draws people to this Psalm has been the truth of its words that for centuries have soothed the soul and brought a sense of peace during times of despair and uncertainty. Words that have comforted through times of sorrow and loss, filling us with hope, when we feel powerless, worried, and afraid.

Perhaps it's how these 6 verses seem to cover the scope of life, from seasons of green pastures and still waters to the deep dark valleys of life we go through and the enemies we face and struggle with and how through all of that we have a promise. The promise of God's presence, provision and protection, assuring us that we never walk alone, and will have all that we need.

We can all agree on the comfort and familiarity of these words found in Psalm 23. But I am also so thankful for the way God continues to speak to us, challenge us, comfort us, and convict us through His Word, even in such a well-known and familiar passage.

Because I admit, I thought I had this Psalm dialed in, and figured out. In fact, there was a time in seminary where I could read and translate Psalm 23 from Hebrew to English. Granted, my translation read nothing like any translation we have, but I knew what it said. I knew the nuances of the language, and I could apply it numerous ways in numerous circumstances.

And of course, since we are doing a sermon series called "Fear not", obviously we had to include Psalm 23. It's a classic.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

Such a familiar and hopeful reminder of God's presence with us and protection over us. And yet, even as familiar as this verse is, we find ourselves confronted by fear. Maybe even overwhelmed by fear with all that is happening in our world today. Perhaps we find ourselves deep in the valley, surrounded on all sides by walls of fear, unable to say with confidence: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

Or, how about Psalm 23:1?

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want”. Many of us can recite this verse from memory and know it very well.

And yet, do we find ourselves still wanting? Unsatisfied? Desiring more? I want this pandemic to be over. I want to hug people. I want to gather with large groups of people. I want to be “liked” and affirmed by others because I am a people pleaser. I want the assurance that it’s gonna be ok. I want world peace. I want to be in control. I want. I want. I want.

Not all of these are bad things to want, but the problem is when our fears become connected to our ‘wants and our ‘wants’ become connected to our identity and all those ‘wants’ end up consuming and controlling us. ‘Wants’ that will never leave us content, satisfied, fulfilled, or at peace. If it sounds exhausting, its because it is.

We know what Psalm 23 says. We are familiar with God’s promises here and yet if we still find ourselves at consumed, overwhelmed by fear, full of worry, and constantly wanting more. Perhaps we have fallen to the hidden danger of familiarity.

While familiarity can be a wonderful and a comforting thing, like a favorite pair of jeans, or a warm cuddly blanket, it also has a hidden danger.

With familiarity comes the hidden danger of something becoming commonplace or ordinary that we end up taking it at face value or for granted, and in the process we lose a sense of wonder and awe.

It makes me think about Wawa. Let me tell you about Wawa. And I know you’re thinking, “wa-What”? But let me attempt to explain. Growing up in Philly there was an amazing and wonderful place called Wawa. It was a chain of stores in Pennsylvania and now all over the East Coast.

And in my feeble attempts to describe it- think a combination of a deli, convenient store, coffee shop, gas station, all in one stop. Full of the promise of great hoagies and good eats anytime of the day. Breakfast, 2nd breakfast, brunch, lunch, linner, dinner, and everything in between and after.

For anyone growing up in Philly it was such a familiar and comforting and convenient part of our lives and culture. I remember in high school my Dad declared Friday as Wawa day. And on our way to school, he would take us to Wawa to fill up breakfast sandwiches, hash browns, soft pretzels, coffee, and candy bars. Great memories.

But the thing is, overtime the familiarity of it became a common, ordinary part of life. No awe or wonder or appreciation at how great it really was... until I moved away and I no longer had access.

A few years ago, on a mission trip to Philadelphia, our students got to experience Wawa and it was awesome. For me it was a reminder of the greatness and awesomeness of Wawa that I had taken for granted and had fallen to the hidden danger of familiarity.

When it comes to the gospel and God's Word, familiarity can become a hidden danger, and a hinderance especially to hearing and living into the power and promises of God's Word.

Psalm 23 is a passage full of power, promise and possibility. And as I have paused, prayed and listened through this text, God has been speaking, teaching and reminding me of some things that I never really noticed or had taken for granted.

So, the question I have had to answer and the question for us is, have we become too familiar that we are missing out on the abundant life Jesus has to offer that comes from living into the power and promise found in Psalm 23?

We know the words of this Psalm. We know God's promise here. But How many of us are living daily into the promise and power of this passage?

Here in verse 1 we find not only a promise but also an answer or solution to experiencing and living the abundant life God has for us. A life in Christ where our needs are met and we are free from fear, worry, and anxiety. What an amazing promise and possibility!

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want or as another translation puts it: "I have all that I need." (Psalm 23 NLT)

Which raises another question we need to ask ourselves? Is the Lord my shepherd? Can we declare like David, "The Lord is my shepherd?" And, do we believe and trust that God, or more specifically Jesus is the Good shepherd, the shepherd of my life?

Because the promise God lays out here is that if we believe and trust and live our lives with the Lord as our shepherd than we will not be in want. We will have all that we need.

The Apostle Paul echoes this truth in Philippians 4:19.

And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

What this means is that Jesus is enough. Jesus is what we need and all we need. He is the good shepherd and whether we are in the green pastures or by still water, or in the dark valley, or in the presence of our enemies the Good Shepherd is by our side.

In whatever we are going through. In whatever problem or difficulty, we face. In whatever worry or fear comes our way. Psalm 23 promises us the Good shepherd will provide what we need and all we need in Jesus.

Jesus claims this truth for us in John 10 as he paints a clear picture of the enemy who is a thief and comes only to steal and kill and destroy; But Jesus says: "I came that you may have life and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

And we find all of this wrapped up into the power and promise of Psalm 23. The abundant, secured, and blessed life to those who trust and follow Jesus as their Lord and savior.

Jesus is all we need, but get this, He is not all that we get.

Talk about the abundant and full life that God invites us into. Even though Jesus is all we need, He is not all that we get.

We see in Psalm 23...

We get and receive guidance, wisdom, restoration, strength, boldness, courage, blessing, peace, security, and so much more.

When the Lord is our shepherd we shall not want. We have all that we need. Are we living into that promise? Are we choosing Jesus, the good shepherd, to shepherd our lives?

But before we can say yes, we also need to acknowledge this where we usually get hung up. Because If the Lord is our shepherd what does that make us? Sheep. Right?

And to be honest we don't want to be sheep. We want to be the shepherd. Our default is to become and be our own shepherd. And the enemy, the thief, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour and will do everything to convince us and deceive us into thinking that we need to be the shepherd of our lives.

And while we are busy being deceived and convinced that we are shepherding our own lives, we are actually still sheep. Sheep being enslaved and being shepherded by our own pride, fear, envy, worry, anxiety, and a want that is never satisfied.

We can't be the shepherd. Even if we want to deny or pretend or try and convince ourselves otherwise the truth remains, we are sheep. Baaaaa.

This isn't new news. Just like we read in Isaiah 53-

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;*

We are sheep and sheep need a shepherd. A good and perfect shepherd. Because the thing about sheep is, they easily get distracted and lost. They don't really see all that great. They don't make great choices and they need constant supervision and direction.

If we choose anything or anyone besides Jesus to be our shepherd we will find ourselves distracted and lost. Unsatisfied and wanting. Restless and weary. Fearful and frantic.

So, what does It look like when Jesus is our shepherd?

When the Lord Is our shepherd we will have what we need and we are invited and welcomed into a relationship between the good and perfect shepherd who knows His sheep and His sheep know Him. It is a relationship between God and His beloved children.

And as the good shepherd he knows exactly what he need, when we need it, and the best way to meet our needs.

When Jesus is our shepherd: *He makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us to still water.*

I never really thought about the Lord making us lie down. If we are being honest, the majority of us find it difficult to lie down, to rest and to be still. To pause and have our souls restored.

But we need it. We need rest. We need stillness and to sit and be present with the Good Shepherd who reminds us who we are and whose we are. God knows this and truly this is how we are restored.

Not only is this a picture of the good and perfect shepherd but also the good and perfect father.

Parents, have you ever had to make your child lie down and take a nap? You know they need some rest, but they are convinced they don't as they stomp off to their rooms crying and yelling, "but I am not tired!!"

We know them better than they know themselves. We know they are tired and they need to rest and they aren't wise enough to make that choice for themselves.

I found interesting and insightful what Philip Keller wrote in regard to sheep and lying down in his book: A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23. Which by the way, I recommend reading it as it has a lot of great insight to this Psalm.

It is almost impossible for (sheep) to lie down unless four requirements are met. Sheep refuse to lie down unless they are free of all fear . . . free from friction with other sheep within the flock). If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down . . . Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. They must be free from hunger. It is significant that to be at rest there must be a definite sense of freedom from fear, tension, aggravations, and hunger... A flock that is restless, discontented, always agitated and disturbed never does well. And the same is true of people.

If you didn't think we were like sheep before, this pretty much nails it on the head.

Jesus, the good shepherd, knows what we need and provides it. He invites us into a relationship and shepherds us first and foremost into rest and freedom.

I love Eugene Peterson's translation of Matthew 11:28-30 that emphasizes this truth and relationship:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

When Jesus is our shepherd: *He leads us and is with us.*

And even as that path moves from green pastures and still waters to the valley and troubling times the Good shepherd is with us.

Eventually we will go through valleys and troubling times, but God is with us. Through our struggles and our darkest valleys, God is with us and he is not leading us to the valley but He is leading us through the valley.

And even in the midst of oppressive, frightening and difficult circumstances that offer every reason to fear, we can experience the power and promise of Psalm 23. God is with you. His rod and staff will comfort you, guide you, and protect you.

Hebrews 13:5-6 says it like this: He has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So, we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

When Jesus is our shepherd, he prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies.

And our enemies can be anything from a circumstance, to a person, a situation or our own fear, guilt, shame, pride, envy, and anger.

Personally, I would rather God just wipe it all away and get rid of my enemies. I don't want to be in the presence of them. Can't it just be me and Jesus?

But the present reality is we live in a broken and fallen world and even a life lived in the presence, promises, and power of God is still a life lived in a world that is not yet fully restored to the fullness and wholeness God has planned for it and for us.

And just because Jesus is our shepherd doesn't mean we will be without troubles, enemies, cares, pain, or the dangers of this world.

But the gospel and promise here is you are at the table and in the presence of the King. The good shepherd. The One who calls you His beloved. The One who loves and values you so very much. The One who leaves the 99 to come after you.

He prepares a table for you and sits with you in the presence of your enemies. Do not fear for He is greater, He is more powerful, and there is nothing that can separate you from the love, and care of the Good Shepherd.

His care is not temporary or seasonal but constant and abundant. His goodness and mercy pursue you all the days of your life.

So, may we find our rest in Jesus the Good Shepherd. May his constant presence renew and restore our restless hearts.

Fear not! The Lord is our shepherd we have all that we need!