

Psalm 23:1-3

A little boy had tears in his eyes after reciting the 23rd Psalm with the congregation. "What's the matter?" his mother whispered. "Why do we say, 'The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want?'" he responded; "I do want Him. I love Jesus. Why wouldn't I want Him?" Those tears were tears of faith. They showed his mother how dear Jesus was to her little boy. Do we ever cry such tears? Or do we instead, at times, show just the opposite? Do we live as though Jesus is the Shepherd we do not want? Sometimes don't we show others by how we live that we do not want God to be our Shepherd? That we sheep much prefer being our own shepherds?

But this is not who you are. Your true Shepherd has drawn you here today because you are precious to Him. You are His sheep even though we often act like we aren't. He draws you to His Word and Sacraments even though we often show that we do not really want Him to. His voice speaks tenderly to you today. His words are full of compassion and mercy...discipline and rebuke at times, yes, for we sinful and straying sheep need to hear such words; but always mercy from beginning to end because He is your Shepherd.

Today on this Good Shepherd Sunday we begin a two-part series on the 23rd Psalm. Next Sunday we will look at the last three verses of the Psalm. This morning we begin with those words which brought tears to the eyes of a little boy: "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want."

David, the second king of Israel, is the author of this Psalm. He had been a shepherd in his youth, and when David writes about the care of his Lord, he can find no better picture to express this loving care than that of a shepherd caring for his sheep. Without help and care, a sheep may very well not survive--at least not for long. A sheep has plenty of wants, and a sheep has all kinds of troubles. But with a shepherd to care for the sheep, it shall not want.

A shepherd of the Holy Land was a man of fine character who was willing to lay down his life for the safety of the sheep if need be. Even though the sheep did not count for much in terms of dollars and cents, still the good shepherd regarded the sheep as his treasure--as his wealth. And the sheep seemed to know this, for where the shepherd leads them, the sheep follow. No matter where he leads, they follow after him for they trust the shepherd. And so, if a sheep could speak, it would say, "I shall not want. I shall not want because my shepherd cares for me."

What a beautiful picture David had of our Lord as he calls Him, "my Shepherd." David had been through much hardship in his life. He had suffered greatly at the hand of King Saul who was seeking to kill him. Even after he was king, David experienced many trials and sorrows. And yet he realized that his loving Lord was taking care of him--for he was his Shepherd. This picture is one which you and I also can take to heart. Our Lord is our Good Shepherd who loves you and cares for you. And even though you suffer hardships in your walk through life, your Shepherd is there with you ready to meet every one of your needs. At times we may wonder if our God really does care for us. Perhaps we experience difficulties which seem to be unbearable. Perhaps we encounter sorrow that leaves us feeling empty inside. But your Lord is with you. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and he also knows well each problem you must face. As God's beloved sheep, we can say--each one of us can, no matter who we are; no matter what our life may be like--"I shall not want. I shall not want for my dear Lord is my Good Shepherd."

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters." The sheep in the days of David were not kept in a fenced pasture or field as they are today. The shepherd and his sheep lived far away from civilization that they might be able to have ample food and water. Every morning the shepherd would come to the sheepfold--usually a walled enclosure shared by several other shepherds and their flocks--where the sheep had been kept safe during the night. At the door, the shepherd would give his particular call, and at once his sheep would leave all the other sheep in the fold and come to him. Then he would lead them out of the sheepfold to the green pastures.

We can see from this the picture of how the Lord cares for us. During the day He leads us safely through the dangers and troubles of life, and at night when we rest, He guards and protects us from harm. Notice that the Psalmist says, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." These words are significant. Why do you suppose the sheep is "lying down" in the pastures of tender, green grass? It means that the sheep has eaten its fill, is content, and is now resting. And it is not resting in a place where the vegetation is scarce or has been eaten off; no, there is much grass left for tomorrow, and the day after, and for a long time after that.

This is a wonderful picture used by David to describe God's care for us. He provides abundantly, not because we somehow earn it or because we are better than others. God provides for you in abundance simply because He is good and merciful. He is your Shepherd. Think of what we really deserve. Certainly not the goodness of our Lord, but rather, His wrath and displeasure and eternal damnation. Our sins earn this for us. But in His goodness, God forgives your sins. And He does it not for what we are, or for what we do; He forgives you for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ, who laid down His life for the sheep. Jesus died on the altar of the cross that your sins would be washed away in your baptism, and that you would be saved from the curse of your sin--eternal death.

The last part of our verse reads, "He leadeth me beside the still waters." Someone once wrote that his expresses the double-care of the shepherd for his sheep; that the background to this picture is the fast-moving waters of the River Jordan. Should a sheep, standing beside the river, get pushed or fall into the water, its wool coat would soak up the water and cause it to drown. To prevent this, the shepherd would dig a trench at a right-angle to the rushing water, and out of the shallow trench the sheep could drink in perfect safety, and refresh itself without any danger whatsoever.

There are many things in the world around us which we could compare to the fast-moving waters of the River Jordan. Dangers which would surely drown us if we were to fall or stumble. But as we follow the voice of our Shepherd in His Word and Sacraments, and rely on Him, trusting that He will lead us through this life and into the life to come, we will find refreshment beside the safety of still waters.

"He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." The third verse of the 23rd Psalm has several thoughts which show the concern of the Lord, our Shepherd, for our souls. A good shepherd does not like to see his sheep suffer in any way. God, too, has compassion upon His children when they experience hardship and sorrow. But God never promised that His children would run the race of life on a carpeted track. I am sure that no parent would want their child to go through life without any problems whatsoever. A child is a living human being and not a vegetable. To grow up and mature, he or she must meet and overcome many problems. Likewise, the shepherd in leading his sheep to green pastures and still waters, will take them over rough and steep paths so that they will learn to love and trust their shepherd even when the

way is difficult. Perhaps the shepherd leads them up and down steep mountain sides. Perhaps the path is narrow and dangerous. Yet, the sheep follow the shepherd because they know and trust him.

And thus our Good Shepherd leads us over many a difficult path in life. The way may be rough for you, and even painful at times (and I've seen this in your lives over the past eight years--some of your paths have been very hard), but He does this for a good reason. He wants us to learn to trust Him and to follow Him even when the way is difficult. The Psalmist reminds us, "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness." We need to learn that God's will for us is for our good. And He is leading us here on earth in the best way possible so that we finally, in the end, reach the green pastures of heaven. And we, who are God's sheep, need to follow our Shepherd as He guides us by the Gospel of Jesus. For even though the path may be bumpy and sorrowful, our Shepherd is the one leading us. He knows...He is the way to heaven.

But how wonderful that God does indeed see our distress in this life. A good shepherd knows that his sheep have problems and burdens, and that unless they are restored and reassured, they become discouraged. In writing the words of this Psalm, David remembered that as the sheep start out in the morning to graze, each takes its place in line and holds that same position all during the day. However, at some time during the day, each sheep leaves its place in line and trots over to the shepherd. The shepherd gently rubs its nose and ears, and talks to and caresses his sheep. Thus, reassured and encouraged, the sheep takes its place in line again.

How we need the reassurance of our Good Shepherd that all is well; that He is here with you taking care of you; that you are forgiven of your sins because of Jesus. In the struggles of our everyday life we need to take time out to go to our Good Shepherd in prayer, in devotion with Scripture, in the hearing of His Word, so that He might gently soothe us and remind us that He loves you and does forgive you because of your Savior. Life is too hard and too full of evil and temptation for us to go it alone. Our help comes from the Lord, our Good Shepherd. He restores your soul as He leads you in the paths of Christ, your Righteousness.

Considering our Lord as our Good Shepherd as David pictures Him, who of us wouldn't, therefore, cry tears like the little boy, in thinking that we would not want Him? But dear fellow sheep, the comfort is that your Shepherd wants you. He died for you. He leads you through life. He is truly your Good Shepherd. Amen.