

# *Ascension Lutheran Church*

*Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of May 3, 2009*

## The Lord is My Shepherd (Psalm 23)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from the Psalm 23:

"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."

This is the text.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, What sorts of things do you crave? Food, sweets, sports, fast cars... We crave all sorts of things don't we – especially deeper things like respect, love, and acceptance. One thing that we all crave is freedom. We have craved it our whole lives. The small child asks, "Do I have to go to bed now?" He wants the freedom to stay up late like the grown-ups. The teenager craves to be free from the rules of his parents who don't seem to understand. This search for freedom is a quest that lasts our whole lives until the day we die. And it is something that most people never really find despite all their searching.

It's ironic though that the very freedom we crave is staring us right in the face. We tend to think that freedom means independence and yet true freedom is found in our dependence on something else. In this free market capitalist society that is so full of opportunities we are told things like, "Make something of yourself" or "Be your own man". In this modern consumerist society we are encouraged to be individuals and to stand out from the rest.

And yet the freedom we so deeply crave can't be found there. Rather, we find it in our dependence, our dependence on the Lord, our Good Shepherd. Yes, Psalm 23 is a song that sings the joys of being dependent on the Lord.

Friends, psalm 23 is one of the most beloved of the Psalms. Some of us may know it by heart. It's a comforting passage about the Lord's presence and care for His people. We all like to hear these words in church or when we have a crisis. But what about the ordinary times? We must ask ourselves, "Do we truly rely on God?" We hear Him on Sunday morning perhaps but do we want to hear Him when we come home from church? What about the other days – the other 167 hours of the week? Are we only Sunday Christians? I hope not.

The sad truth is, we tend to rely on number one – that is, the world's number one: me, myself, and I. Instead of the voice of the Good Shepherd too often we follow the voice of our own self-interest. Sadly, we would rather listen to someone flatter and praise us than to someone who might challenge us to change. To change for the good is not in our sinful nature. It is easier to vent our anger and blurt out the first thing that comes to

mind than to pray and consider our words with care. It is easier to point out the faults of others than to judge ourselves first. Remember, as the saying goes 'when you point the finger at someone else there are three pointing right back at you.'

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is a reminder of our calling to follow the Lord's will and not our own self-interests. We know this is a Biblical concept and yet sometimes we misuse God's name as a way to conceal and somehow justify our self-interests. We say things like, "It wasn't God's will for me to do such and such." While this may or may not be true, too often the term, "God's will" is used as a cop out for something we simply don't want to do. Too often we use it as an excuse for not doing something that may be outside our comfort zone, whether it is teaching a Sunday School class or what have you.

This psalm, as comforting as it is, is a challenge for us to stop relying on ourselves. It is a challenge to rely on the Good Shepherd instead who deeply cares and supplies all things; not to be like stubborn sheep that do their own thing and then get into danger when they wander from the fold.

There is no reason to wander from the words of Jesus Christ. He is the Lord. In Him we shall not want. This means we shall lack nothing. He provides everything we need. He is gracious. God's mercy and favour is abundant in Jesus and we can depend on Him for any and every need. His favour, however, may not look like abundance in this world. True, we experience setbacks. With the current economic situation, for example, people have lost their jobs and taken pay cuts. It is a struggle. We may get sick; we may get injured, we may even lose loved ones. But God is present through all these things. In His grace He is there to welcome us as His honoured guests, to comfort and be our strength in these trying times.

Yes, we are wandering sheep and yet, the Good Shepherd calls us home to His fold, each and every day. He calls us to His side, to walk with Him to listen to His voice, to have Him guide our conversations, our decisions, and our thoughts and everything we do. He supplies what we need every time. He freely gives it. We see in our text that He doesn't keep us at a distance but He calls us very close to His side. He prepares a table before us. He anoints us as His own.

He does this even when things seem to be falling apart at the seams in life. During this deep recession, in the midst of the swine flu, in the event of sickness, the Lord is still present. This is what it means, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." His presence is the one thing we need because He is the One who will see us through whatever dark time we may be going through. He simply asks that we trust Him. He will never let us down. We may not understand His ways, but He invites us to lean on Him. As Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."

Though His favour may seem hidden at times, your standing before God on account of Christ remains the same. Though our sins are like filthy rags the Lord invites and welcomes us as His special guests at His banquet table in the Lord's Supper. He comes here to supply the forgiveness we sorely need, to assure us of His presence and favour

through Jesus; He comes to strengthen our faith and give grace to love our neighbour with the same love He shows to us and to have our sights on His work of ministry.

Friends, the image of the Shepherd and the sheep is foundational to understanding our relationship with the Lord. The psalmist says, "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." The staff is an instrument. It was used by shepherds to count the sheep, to guide them, and to rescue them when they get into trouble. It is a symbol of the Lord's authority and the protection He gives under His authority. He steers us in from our erring ways. When we do wrong He rebukes us. He corrects our crooked ways. He protects us from false teaching through His Word. He speaks to us through His called servants, through pastors, through teachers, and through the Bible itself. Let us always have ears to hear Him even when it may not be what our itching ears want to hear.

The psalm says, "He leads me in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake." He leads us in the same path as the Good Shepherd, the straight and narrow path of Jesus the Christ. He alone is the way, the truth and the life and He leads us to walk with Him and follow Him every step of the journey. His death and resurrection is the way to the heavenly home. And He leads us to feed on Him, to graze in His pasture of grace so to speak so we can be more like Him and so we can grow in living a righteous life.

Friends, in this precious psalm we begin in pastures, and we end in the House of the Lord. This is the journey of God's people and it is the final destination if we hold to His Word and hear Him as our Good Shepherd. For Jesus' voice is the voice of freedom in this world, His is the voice of refreshment and life itself. And He is with you always. For He has laid down His life for you and will never leave you. Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.