

4.23.2023 Easter 2 (Psalm 23; John 10:11)

*“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 for ever.”*

Most people have a favorite passage of Scripture, a chapter or verse in which God provides them with an extraordinary measure of comfort or truth, but no matter which particular passage you would cite as your own, there are some that are known and loved by all. The 23rd Psalm is perhaps at the top of that list. For over 3,000 years this psalm of David has been among the most precious gifts given to the people of God. It has served as a sign of God’s provision in times of peace and prosperity, a reminder that the wisdom, power, and goodness with which He directs the entire universe is carefully and lovingly measured out to meet the individual needs of each of His children. This psalm has also served a source of unfailing comfort in the midst of trial or sorrow, because again, we recognize the same Omnipotent God who so graciously and mercifully meets our every need, shepherds us as we walk through the valley. He leads us, He guides our steps, He delivers us from the evil one.

The 23rd psalm is a sign of God’s provision and a source of unfailing comfort, because it is an intimate portrayal of who we are to Him. During Morning Prayer we stand together, and through the words of the 100th Psalm, give thanks that *“we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture”* (Psalm 100:3). True, yet in contrast the 23rd Psalm never speaks about a group of people. There are no pronouns like we or us or they. In this psalm, David speaks in the most personal way about who we are to God by using words like my, me, I, and You. He tells us, *“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...”* David knows the Shepherd intimately, and therefore he can boldly proclaim, *“Yea, though I walk through the valley*

*of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...*” God is with me.

*The Lord is my Shepherd.* Every one of us can say, “God is mine,” or to use the words of Psalm 63:1, “*O God, thou art my God,*” and just as a shepherd knows each sheep in his flock, just as the shepherd loves and cares and calls each one by name, God loves and cares and calls every one of us by name. The enemy would have us believe that we’re just another face in a crowded world of 8 billion people, but the word of God proclaims the truth that the Lord is my Shepherd, that He “*directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives*” (Psalm 37:23). We may sometimes feel ordinary and overlooked, but to God, who “*created my inmost being,*” to God who “*knit me together in my mother’s womb*” (Psalm 139:13), to the Shepherd every individual soul is precious, every one of us is seen.

The One who so “*fearfully and wonderfully*” (Psalm 139:14) created the unique person you are, continues to honor you with individual worth through an intimate, personal relation to you. It’s important to recognize the union you have with the Shepherd of your soul is not a relationship, and thanks be to God that it isn’t, because everyday we see examples of what happens to relationships. Relationships are often conditional, temporary unions, that begin and end for many different reasons, but a relation is not so easily broken. Consider the difference between a relationship and the blood relation between a parent and a child, a brother and sister, or the covenantal relation between a husband and wife in Holy Matrimony, in which two become *one flesh* (Mark 10:6-8). Consider the difference, and then glory in the truth that the union you share with God is a relation, for you were made in His *image* and *likeness* (Genesis 1:27), you were baptized and received into Christ’s flock, and now He feeds you with His Body, enlivens you with His Blood, and dwells in you through the power of His Holy Spirit.

The inspired words of David provide us with the assurance of the Lord’s presence, His guidance, and His provision, and these truths fill us with comfort, hope, and unspeakable joy. You might say they restore our soul, and yet, the first verse of our Gospel reading today transforms the meaning of the 23rd Psalm. The light of the Gospel infinitely elevates the truth contained in these words. In the Gospel we read this morning, Jesus said, “*I am the Good*

*Shepherd: the Good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep*” (John 10:11).

Wasn't it enough that the Lord should condescend to shepherd us? Wasn't it far more than enough that He should guard us, guide us, feed us, and deliver us from the enemy? In our finite, human minds we couldn't have imagined anything greater, but the infinite wisdom and love of God do not know such limits, and therefore the Good Shepherd did the unthinkable, He gave His life for the sheep. The Master died for the servant, the King for the rebels, the Creator for His creatures, *“the righteous for the unrighteous”* (1 Peter 3:18).

*“All we like sheep have gone astray”* (Isaiah 53:6), and it was more than enough that the Good Shepherd would leave the ninety-nine *“to seek and to save the lost”* (Luke 19:10). It was far more than enough, but Divine love motivated our Lord to go even further. Because of His love for you, the Good Shepherd sought to understand your weakness by being made weak Himself (Romans 8:3), He sought to understand your temptations by being led into the wilderness to be tempted (Matthew 4:1-11), He sought to understand your sorrow by becoming *“a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”* (Isaiah 53:3), and He sought not only to understand, but to conquer your death by dying Himself (Revelation 1:18).

*“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us...”* (1 John 4:10), that He gave everything, and backed down from nothing in order to shepherd you in weakness, temptation, sorrow, and death. In all things He sought to walk with you, and in doing so, Jesus proved Himself to be the Good Shepherd. He is not the hireling, a hired hand whose only motivation is the promise of being compensated for his time. He is not a man who when things take a dark turn, leaves the sheep, and puts an end to a conditional, temporary relationship because you can't pay him enough to make this sacrifice. In the valley of the shadow of death, the hired hand would leave the sheep and save himself, but Jesus, the Good Shepherd, would remain with His sheep, and because He is fully man, He would die with them, and because He is fully God, He could die for them, that by His death and resurrection, He would safely lead us through death's dark valley to the green pastures and still waters of His risen, everlasting life. Because we died, the Good Shepherd would die, and because He rose, we will rise also.