

Pastor Jon's Sermon from 4/21/2024

"It's the Company We Keep on the Journey That Matters" based on Psalm 23

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday.

Our psalm appointed for today is the beloved Psalm 23. I have seen how this Psalm brings so many people comfort and hope as they navigate difficult changes in life or spend time in the hospital or in nursing home. I am amazed that even those who are in memory care can often recite the words of Psalm 23 as if it were engraved on their hearts. It is an honor to share this Psalm among those who know it best.

Psalm 23 is about trusting in God to provide for us and protect us as we walk through the hills and valleys of life. How are you doing? Are you on the hillside looking back or in the valley right now?

Psalm 23 is a Psalm of David written from the perspective of thankfulness. Looking back on a difficult journey, David realized that God, our good shepherd, was there the whole time. He might not have seen God at work the whole the time, but realizes it now.

David called this difficult time the valley of the shadow of death, or the darkest valley. We know the valley of the shadow, don't we? Times when we are up against it. It can be a place of anxiety, worry, or fear of the unknown. Are you going through something now wondering.. "how am I going to make it through this?"

Psalm 23 is written in metaphor. If the Lord is our shepherd, that makes us sheep, right? The problem is that sheep have a tendency to wander and stray, especially if they are left to their own devices. Sounds like us humans. When we are separated from our shepherd we get lost. But we have a shepherd in Jesus Christ, who is willing to leave the 99 sheep who are already in the fold to find the 1 lost sheep and bring it home.

According to Elizabeth Webb on the Working Preacher Commentary this week, A sheep is a particularly vulnerable creature, especially when on its own. Sheep need a leader so as not to wander aimlessly.

Sheep have no defense against predators except for flocking, yet their instinctive flight response to danger can also cause panic and scattering. Individual sheep are highly stressed when separated from their flock. Indeed, sheep must be able to see each other in order to graze without agitation, and the loss of that visual contact can lead to further panic and flight. A lost sheep is, if you will, a sitting duck.

Being a sheep is a perfect metaphor for us humans. Can you relate to the idea of becoming highly stressed when we are separated from our flock? We are stronger when we are in community. Jeranna shared an Instagram real with me recently that really hit me. It was a cartoon with two friends. The question was, what is more important, the in life... the journey or the destination. The friend answered, "The Company". Isn't that true, the company we are blessed with is gift. Christian community is a gift.

With the Lord as our shepherd, the NRSV says, "I shall not be in want." We don't use that English construction much. "I shall not be in want". It literally means that we lack nothing. We have all we need. Our Good Shepherd desires to meet all our needs...

... to provide a safe place to lie down and graze, still waters that are safe places to drink, and a righteous pathway. When we see God providing for us and working in our lives it allows us to say, "It is well with my soul." Our cup can then runneth over with thankfulness.

Even though we will walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil... for you are with me, your rod and staff they comfort me. Notice the psalm doesn't say, God will eliminate evil. Evil will continue to exist. But we can contend with it and not be afraid. Why, because we are in hands of our Good Shepherd.

Even in the presence of our enemies, God will continue to set a table before us. I think of the bold act of congress today to put together an aid package for Ukraine, Gaza, Taiwan, and Israel in spite of great ideological differences. Hopefully lives can be preserved and hungry mouths fed.

Psalm 23 insists that we can trust in God's deliverance **in the midst of** evil. Whatever befalls us, individually and as communities, we are

not defeated, because God is with us. The God of Goodness and mercy promises to pursue us the rest of our lives and never give up on us until we are in the fold. Then we can dwell in the house of the Lord forever and ever. Amen