

WE BELONG TO GOD!

Psalm 23, Good Shepherd Sunday

Easter 4-A, May 11, 2014

In 2001, Max Lucado wrote a marvelous book about the 23rd Psalm entitled: **TRAVELING LIGHT**. He begins the book by writing: “There is a lot about traveling I don’t know. I don’t know why men would rather floss a crocodile than ask for directions. I don’t know why vacation slides aren’t used to treat insomnia, and I don’t know when I will learn not to order foods with names on a menu I can’t pronounce. But most of all, **I don’t know how to travel light**. – “I don’t know how to travel light,” Lucado writes, “without granola bars, sodas, and rain gear. I don’t know how to travel without flashlights and a generator and a global positioning system. I don’t know how to travel without an ice chest of wieners. What if I stumble upon a backyard barbeque and have nothing to bring to the party?”

But then this great Christian author reminds us that there are all kinds of other baggage that we may carry along with us on this journey called life too. We may carry a suitcase of guilt, or a sack of discontent. We can drape a duffel bag of weariness over our right shoulder while hanging another bag of grief on the left. Strap on a backpack of doubt, and overnight bag of loneliness and a trunk full of fear. Pretty soon you’re pulling more stuff around with you than a skycap at the airport terminal, and it’s exhausting!

No wonder we’re so tired at the end of the day. Lugging luggage is exhausting. But if we let him, God will lighten our loads, but how do we let him? **This is only possible when we remember that we belong to God!** Psalm 23 consists of 117 words and David devotes the last 115 of those 117 words to describe the first two: **“The LORD.”**

In the arena of unnecessary luggage, the psalmist inadvertently may be reminding us of the weightiest luggage of all: The false god people may choose to fashion in their own minds; the god who looks nice but does little. For some, their god is only a genie in a bottle; the one you call upon only in an emergency; and the one you hope will go back immediately into that bottle after he has done for you the thing that you were hoping that he would do for you!

For some people God is a sweet grandpa, so softhearted, so wise, so kind, but very, very old. Unfortunately grandpas can doze off when you need them most. Many people who claim to believe in god believe in a god who looks nice but does little. **But this is not the God whom David is writing about in the 23rd Psalm.**

“Do you want to know who the true God really is?” asks David. “Then read this!” And he writes down the Hebrew word “Yahweh” and then says, “Yahweh is my shepherd!”

Yahweh is the Hebrew name for the LORD God and Moses was the first to learn it. Seven centuries prior to David, the 80-year-old shepherd named Moses was tending sheep when a nearby bush caught fire and his life would soon be changed. Moses was told to return to Egypt to rescue the enslaved Hebrews. Of course, he came up with more excuses to offer the LORD God than a little girl provides for her parents at bedtime, **but God trumped each one.**

Finally Moses capitulated and asked that Voice in the burning bush: **“When I go to the Israelites, I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers sent me to you!’ What if the people ask me: ‘What is his name? What shall I tell them?’”** Then God said to Moses, **“Tell them ‘I AM WHO I AM’.”** When you go to the people of Israel, tell them, **“I AM sent me to you!”** (Exodus 3:13-14)

The name **“I AM”** is actually the present participle of the Hebrew verb **“to be”!** The true name of God as given to us in the Bible is the GOD WHO CAUSES THINGS TO BE. He is an unchanging God. He is the eternal God. There never was a time when God wasn’t and there never will be a time when God won’t be. His attributes and his

characteristics are always the same. He doesn't need to gain knowledge or wisdom or insight from anyone, for he is the absolute Source of all true knowledge and wisdom and insight. He is love.

In Psalm 90, the only psalm of the 150 psalms ascribed to the **authorship of Moses, the prophet praises Yahweh saying: "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world; from everlasting to everlasting you are God!" (v.2) He is an unchanging God, an uncaused God and an ungoverned God.** Yet, King David declares, this very God, the LORD God who causes all things to be is **"my Shepherd."** **I belong to this God, and because he is my Shepherd he longs for me to live out my life in this world in his way!**

Can you remember Frank Sinatra's old song, **"I Did it My Way"**? We human beings always want to do things our way! Forget the easy way, the common way or the best way! Forget God's way! We want to do things our way! According to Isaiah **"We all like sheep have gone astray! We've turned everyone to his own way!" (Isaiah 53:6)** You wouldn't think that sheep would be obstinate, however, would you? Of all God's animals, the sheep is the least able to take care of itself. You can't teach an old sheep new tricks! Have you ever met a sheep trainer? Do you know of anyone who has ever taught a sheep to roll over? Sheep are not that bright, to put it kindly. Sheep are rather dumb!

Sheep are also absolutely defenseless. They have no fangs or sharp claws. They can't bite you with their poisonous venom or outrun you. That's why you never see **sheep as a team's mascot.** We've heard of the **St. Louis Rams, the Chicago Bulls and the Seattle Seahawks!** But have you ever heard of the **New York Lambs?**

When David confesses Yahweh to be his Shepherd, he is willing also to be known as God's sheep. When David, who became **himself a warrior, a minstrel, and ambassador for God,** searched for an illustration to tell other people about his relationship with God, he remembered his days as a shepherd. He remembered how he lavished attention on the sheep day and night. How he slept with them and watched over them. And the way that he cared for those sheep reminded him of the way that our God cares for us!

Just as the shepherd meets the sheep's every need, so our God meets our every need too. And God alone is the One who can conquer our discontent.

"I have a secret to share with you!" the psalmist says to us, **"the secret of true satisfaction! The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want!"**

So first of all remember that your stuff isn't your stuff and secondly, that when you die, you can't take it with you! **You can't really take it with you; ask any coroner. Ask any embalmer. Ask any funeral home director.** No one takes anything with him. When one of the wealthiest men in history, John D. Rockefeller, died, his accountant was asked, **"How much money did Mr. Rockefeller leave to his loved ones?"** The accountant's reply was: "All of it!"

In **Ecclesiastes 5:15,** we read: **"Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand!"**

All that stuff that we sometimes imagine we have to have to be happy, it isn't really ours, not really, and we can't take it with us when we depart from this life! God alone is the secret of satisfaction; the secret to any amount of contentment we can ever know is this life! (Philippians 4:11-12)

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want!" God alone sets us free from the prison of want! Paul writes: **"Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into this world and it is certain that we won't take anything out of it. But if we have food and clothing, with these we can be content!" (1 Timothy 6:6-9)**

Our Good Shepherd frees us from the need to do things our way. Our Good Shepherd alone frees us from the prison of want. **Our Good Shepherd alone can give us rest!**

Most animals know how to rest, but there is only one other living creature that has as much trouble resting as we do. Not dogs. They doze. Not bears. They hibernate. Cats invented the catnap and sloths slumber 24 hours a day. Most animals know how to rest, but there is one big exception. These creatures are woolly, simpleminded and slow. No, ladies, not your husbands on a Saturday; but so often sheep. **Sheep can't sleep unless the conditions are perfectly right.**

Philip Keller is a pastor who worked for eight years in his youth as a shepherd in Australia. He says there are **four conditions under which sheep can never sleep!** They can't sleep if they are **fearful**. They can't sleep if they are being **tormented or harassed by another sheep**. They can't sleep if there are **parasites pestering them and flies buzzing around their noses**. And they can't sleep if they are **hungry!** Everything has to be just right!

Unfortunately sheep cannot find safe pasture on their own, nor can they spray themselves with insecticide, nor can they deal properly with other sheep that are bothering them, or find food for themselves. They need help! They need a shepherd to lead them and help them to **"lie down in green pastures!"**

I didn't know till this past week that **sheep will not drink water from a flowing stream or a babbling brook** because it is far too scary for them. **"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters!"**

And isn't there something else he does for us of extreme importance? **"He restores my soul!"**

Do you remember the first temptation that the devil set before our Lord Jesus out in the wilderness? **"If you are the Son of God, command that stone to become a piece of bread!"** But our Lord replied, **"Behold, it is written, man shall not live by bread alone but by every Word that comes forth from the mouth of God!"** (Matthew 4:4)

On the day after our Lord Jesus fed over 5000 people with those five barley loaves and two fish the recipients of that great meal approached him again, hoping that he might do the same thing again but Jesus would not honor their request. Instead he said to them, **"Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you!"** (John 6:27)

"There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to cure the sin-sick soul. Sometimes I feel discouraged and I think my works in vain, and then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul; you can tell the love of Jesus and say he died for all. Don't ever feel discouraged, for Jesus is your friend; And if you lack for courage, he'll ne'er refuse to lend." (LSB 749)

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake!" (Psalm 23:1-4)

Have you ever wondered: **"Why does God have anything to do with us?"** The psalmist tells us here that it is in part for his name's sake. **There's no other name on the marquee. There is no other name up in lights. There is no other name on the front page of the newspaper in response to that question: "Why does God have anything to do with us?"**

The Scriptures teach us that it is all done to God's glory. And why is this so? Is it because God has an ego problem? No, it's because we do. He takes the credit, not because he needs it, but because he knows that we can't handle it. **We aren't content with a modicum amount of compliments and praise. Too much praise swells our heads and shrinks our brains and pretty soon we start thinking that we are primarily responsible for our own survival.** Pretty soon we forget we were made out of dirt and rescued from sin by the blood of God's perfect Son that was shed for us on the cross! You heard how St. Peter summarizes all of this so very beautifully for us in our second lesson today. Of our Lord Jesus he says, **"He bore our sins in his body unto death on a tree that we might die**

to sin and live to righteousness. At one time you were straying like lost sheep, but now you have been returned to the Shepherd and the Guardian of your souls!"

At the end of each musical composition that Johann Sebastian Bach ever wrote, he penned the words in Latin: "Solo Deus Gloria!" "To God alone be the glory!"

Why does the Bible teach us that **pride always goes before a fall**; and that those who exalt themselves will be humbled; and those who humble themselves will be exalted? Because it's true! Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3, *"We are not sufficient to claim anything as coming from us, our sufficiency alone comes from God who makes us competent to be ministers of a New Covenant; not of the law that kills, but of the Gospel that gives life!"*

St. Paul writes in Colossians 3:17, *"Whatever you do in word of deed, do it all in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to the Father through him!"*

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. And even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me! Your rod and your staff they comfort me!"

There comes that day in the late spring when the good shepherd has to lead his sheep out of the sheep pen, early in the morning. As he calls out to them, they follow because they know his voice and are obedient to him. But that day must come when he will lead them to greener pastures elsewhere, though the journey itself would be treacherous and entail mastering some mountainous terrain, when the crags bursting forth from the mountainside are sharp and the valleys below are very deep. But the sheep, though fearful, do not have to worry; not really, because their shepherd indeed knows the way. He has made that same trip safely before them!

You know one reason why this psalm is so popular with many people is because it reminds us we all have an appointment with death at some point or another. We have many appointments for all sorts of things in this life. We have appointments with the doctor and the dentist. Appointments at the school we attend and at the place of business where we work! But the writer of Hebrews also reminds us that we all have an appointment with death!

In **Hebrews 9:26-27** we read, *"Christ has appeared once for all, at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for people to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him!"*

I know that there are times when we all might like to change that verse in the Bible just a bit, just a word or two, perhaps, might do. Maybe we wish we could change it to, "Nearly everyone must die," or "everyone but me must die," or "everyone who forgets to eat a healthy diet and never exercises must die!" But these are not God's words to us.

As a result of sin having entered this world, sin, which we all have inherited, and sin, which we are perfectly capable of committing when left to ourselves; everyone must die, unless Christ comes for his church in glory before that appointed hour.

But because our good Shepherd has walked through that valley of the shadow of death for us and been raised victoriously from death and the grave three days later, we also know that we have eternal life in his name.

Friends, don't miss the shift in the psalmist's vocabulary. Up to this point you and I have been his audience and God has been his topic. But now David speaks to God and we are to listen. "For you are with me and your rod and your staff they comfort me!"

Don't face death, dearest brothers and sisters, without facing God first. Don't even attempt to speak of death without speaking to God first. He and he alone can guide you and me safely through the valley of the shadow of death. Others may speculate about it or aspire to lead you and me, but only the good Shepherd knows the way to get us to the house of the Lord, both safely and securely.

To make us certain of that journey and its proper end in heaven, he prepares a table before us again today in the presence of our enemies; those three great enemies of sin, death, and the power of the evil one. "Take and eat this, is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Take and drink, this is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins!" And where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation!

Today is Mother's Day and yet we all know that while the hearts of some mothers this morning are rejoicing, the hearts of some mothers are no doubt breaking too. As much as churchgoers think they might like to hear a nice inspirational sermon about the perfect mother and her perfect children, such a message could put a good many people on a guilt trip too. For there are no perfect mothers and there are no perfect children, but there is a perfect God who sent his perfect son into the world, to shed his perfect blood for us on a cross, so that we by the grace of God might now become clothed in the perfection of his Son through faith ourselves.

Today the hearts of some mothers and the hearts of some children are breaking, yet God alone can make the wounded whole! So in closing let me share with you just a little bit of Mother's Day humor.

Did you hear what the digital clock said to its mother? Look, mom, no hands! Why is a computer so smart? Because it listens to its motherboard! Why do mother kangaroos hate rainy days? Because the children have no place to play inside! "Johnny," his Sunday school teacher asked him, "does your family usually say a prayer at mealtime?" "No, teacher," Johnny replied. "We don't have to. My mom is a pretty good cook!"

The Good Shepherd says, "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly!" He has come that we might have new life with the Father through him. He has come so that our lives might be made new! God grant that to us for Jesus' sake, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit! Amen