



**The Lord's Prayer**  
**... A Sermon Series**  
***The Shepherd's Psalm***

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**The Lord's Prayer ...**  
**a Four Part Sermon Series in October**  
*The Shepherd's Psalm*

Psalm 23 is arguably the most memorized, the most quoted, the most cherished piece of scripture for Christians. Even the most biblically impaired have heard somewhere, sometime, "The Lord is my shepherd." These six verses continue to offer comfort and strength to people in a variety of life situations.

The Lord is a Shepherd - watching, tending, worrying, caring for each and every sheep in the flock. And for good reason. It is only through the vigilance of the shepherd that safety is assured. The psalmist declares a reliance on God, in total confidence and trust, for preserving his well-being. Over these four weeks the sermons will move us through many of the deepest issues of life.

## **“The Shepherd’s Psalm ... *All Sheep Need a Shepherd*”**

*“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.” -- Psalm 23:1-2 (KJV)*

### **Psalms 23 (King James Version)**

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.

Prayer: *We are warmed by your sun, encircled by your love, blessed by your presence, and sustained by your Spirit. You gather us into this church family and give us a song in our hearts, laughter on our lips and kindness on our touch. Help us to hear your word and to be challenged by your mission in this community. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

How many here today have memorized the words to Psalm 23? Most of us learned those words back when we were in second grade or maybe during a confirmation class. Now that we have

passed many other sacred passages in our lives, we now hear those sacred words at many memorial services.

The words from *The Shepherd's Psalm* are among a handful of great biblical passages that were memorized by our ancestors in the faith. These words breathe genuinely within our psyches and speak profoundly to our souls and our faith in God. It is this faith in God that assures us even when we lose a loved one in death and when we know we are moving closer to that personal dying experience. Over the next few weeks we will hear other versions and experience new ways of hearing the assurance of God.

In many commentaries, the author of Psalm 23 is suggested to be King David. The Psalm begins: "The Lord is my shepherd." Intuitively, all of us know that shepherds are good, kind, and gentle. Even in a technological society and having never met a shepherd face to face, we all know that shepherds are calm and caring. Since our years as children we have been taught that by Bible stories and especially those picturing Jesus as the good shepherd, caressing a lamb in his arms. We know that *All Sheep need a Shepherd!*

In the Old Testament, "the Lord is my shepherd" referred to God. In the New Testament, "the Lord is my shepherd" referred to Jesus. Who is our shepherd ... is it God ... or Jesus? Both are referred to as Lord. We know that both the Lord God and the Lord Jesus are good and that our Lord is the good shepherd. The phrase, "good shepherd" helps us to understand God and how God works within our lives. The Lord Jesus, the Lord God is my shepherd.

Let's go onto the next phrase" "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." What is meant that I shall not be "in want?" One Old Testament scholar has written that this proved that King David was an old man and was no longer wanting for anything. As a young man, King David would have wanted our equivalent to cars, boats, houses, computers; he wanted all the latest junk of his time in history.

Here we are in Arizona ... in the final years of our lives and we know how life works. When you are young you get a house and fill it up with junk and then more junk. How many of you

have extra room in your storage area? Yet, how many of you have cupboards that are empty? Is there extra space in your closets? In your garage? When we reach this stage in our lives and we debate about moving to a smaller house ... what are we going to do with all this stuff? Perhaps your kids come and sell off your stuff when you are no longer around to watch the garage sale. By the end of our lives, we do not have very much stuff left. And the wealth that we have is not material things, but the wealth of love from our spouse, our family, our close friends ... and this church family ... all are important.

We have learned that God's wealth is found in peoples' love around us. The happiness in life does not come from material things, but from human relationships. The psalmist says it well: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" ... more material things. It is all about ***All Sheep needing a Shepherd!*** We all learn that lesson, eventually.

Rabbi Kushner has written about this Psalm and his son, born with an incurable illness, who died at only 14 years old. "I asked myself, how did my wife and I get through that? You would think that would shatter the faith of the average person. Where did we find the strength and the ability to raise him, to comfort him when he was sick and scared, and ultimately to lose him? And the only answer is, when we used up all of our own strength and love and faith, there really is a God, and he replenishes your love and your strength and your faith." (see *The Lord is My Shepherd*)

"The Lord is my shepherd" gets mirrored by the line, "I will not lack." The poet says the same thing twice, but the second line fills in the meaning of the first line. God is the one in whose presence we will never finally be lacking. In his presence and under his guidance we will never be alone. In God's loving care we will never be abandoned. ***All Sheep need a Shepherd!***

So what is it we will not lack? We will never lack for a God who loves us, who cares for us and who has prepared a place for us. That is your shepherd and my shepherd ... and ***All Sheep need a Shepherd!*** We have also read from the 10th chapter of John where Jesus says: "*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the*

*Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.”* And so it is with our Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ, who leads us through the troubled and difficult times of life. But there is a reason, a purpose and that is to lead us to greener pastures of deeper trust and faith. Jesus calls us to trust in him, to put our faith in him, even when we cannot always see or understand his plan or purpose.

Let me close with one of those “preacher stories” that makes the rounds. It was about 1850 with snow flurries, frozen ground, and in a small little log cabin was a boy by the name of Timmy, who was dying of diphtheria. The pastor who came that day was a Methodist circuit rider who rode his horse hundreds of miles to cabins and churches, visiting them every few months. This pastor came to inquire about Timmy, who he had heard was sick and he was ushered to a back room where Timmy was in bed.

The pastor said, “Timmy, do you know how to say the 23rd psalm?” “O yes, I learned it when I was in second grade, in Sunday School. It goes like this. “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.” “No Timmy I want to teach you a new way to say the 23rd psalm.

As you begin the first sentence, you count your fingers and when you get to the fourth word, the word, “my,” you grab that finger. A wedding ring is on the third finger of your mother’s and father’s hand and it is the finger of love. Say the words of the first sentence as you count your fingers, then grab the third finger when you say the word, “my”. Timmy practiced saying the first sentence of the psalm and they said their goodbyes and the pastor left.

In the spring the pastor returned to the log cabin and the snow was gone and he saw a little mound of dirt near the cabin with a cross on it. The pastor found Timmy’s parents and they talked about Timmy. They talked about his death; and finally the mother asked. “You know pastor, something strange happened when Timmy died. We kissed him goodnight. In the morning, first thing, we went through the curtain to see him and he was gone; he had died. But it was so strange. His right hand was still wrapped

around the finger of his left hand. Do you know what that means, pastor?"

When you say the 23rd psalm, we all need to know how to say the first line: the Lord is ... my ... shepherd.

*All Sheep need a Shepherd* ... even you and me!

Scriptures: Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

**“The Shepherd’s Psalm ...  
Come to Me  
and I Will Show You the Way”**

*“He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” – Psalm 23:2-3*

**Psalm 23 (*The Message*, Eugene Peterson)**

God, my shepherd! I don’t need a thing.  
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,  
you find me quiet pools to drink from.  
True to your word, you let me catch my breath  
and send me in the right direction.  
Even when the way goes through Death Valley,  
I’m not afraid when you walk at my side.  
Your trusty shepherd’s crook makes me feel secure.  
You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies.  
You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.  
Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.  
I’m back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.

*Prayer: You know, Lord, that we come here in differing states of mind. Some are sure and confident of their faith; others are wavering and uncertain. Some feel good about themselves, while others are almost drowning in personal and family problems. But whatever our state of mind and heart, we are pleased that you have invited us to be here, and we anticipate your blessing. In name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.*

Many of you know Rabbi Harold Kushner for his 1981 book *“When Bad Things Happen to Good People.”* Rabbi Kushner was

recently interviewed on television and that interview is posted on the internet. Let me share just a snippet of his conversation.

“No matter how grievous a funeral was, no matter how tragic a memorial service was, if I just started to recite the familiar words of the twenty-third Psalm, ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures ...’ it tranquilized the congregation. It just makes people feel calm. Right after 9/11, when everybody was asking me, ‘Where was God that Tuesday? How could God have let such a thing happen?’ The answer I found myself giving was, ‘God’s promise was never that life would be fair. God’s promise was, when it’s your turn to confront the unfairness of life, no matter how hard it is, you’ll be able to handle it, because He’ll be on your side. He will give you the strength you need to find your way through.’” (see <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week813/feature.html>)

These words could be straight from Psalm 23. In our world with all its scary news and instant reporting of tragic events we do not have to be afraid ... and we can know and believe there is hope. The Psalmist comes and tells us ... God is here leading us and we are never alone.

Today in our second look at Psalm 23, I would like us to compare human beings to the lowly sheep. Let me suggest that there are three characteristics that we humans share with sheep. The first comparison is that sheep are rather dumb animals. Sheep do not lack intelligence, but they are dumb because their herding instinct is stronger than their reasoning. If one sheep goes over a cliff, the whole herd will follow. Likewise, as human beings, we often suffer when our herding instinct becomes stronger than our intelligence. We, too, follow the crowd or the current fad. We think back only to Nazi Germany and how many intelligent Christian people blindly followed the pack of sheep. What I am suggesting is that sometimes this instinct is so strong that it overrules our intelligence and we do rather dumb things. The fundamental principle is true: we human beings are like sheep ... and in sheep the herding instinct is so strong that it often overrules our rational intelligence.

The second characteristic is that we are vulnerable to the wolves out there in the real world, just like the sheep. We know that we are vulnerable to death, disease, and injury. We know that life is fragile, easily broken, and sometimes filled with deep hurts. As we experience life in retirement, we see and experience through others how quickly things can change. Suddenly, there is a car accident, a diagnosis of cancer, or a fall with a sharp pain in the hip. Everything was going so well last week and this week it has all changed. Yes, we are like sheep and life is very, very fragile.

A third characteristic of sheep is that they wander away from their shepherd just like human beings wandering away from God. We have a tendency to drift from God, go with the flow in the opposite direction of the Christian Gospel, ever so slowly, losing the closeness and deep faith that we once had. And someday, after months ... or years, we wake up and say, "What happened to the faith that I once had so many years ago?" What I am suggesting is that we human beings are like sheep and we wander away from God.

Now, let me go one step further in this comparison by suggesting that we human beings are like sheep in that we do not have homing instincts. When sheep get lost, they do not find their way home. We all know dogs have a strong homing instinct and can travel miles to return to the master. Yet, when a sheep is lost it never finds its way back home. Somebody has to go out and find that sheep and bring it back.

One of the great deceptions of life is that we are not sheep. I am a strong, independent male man ... or a strong self-reliant woman. I control my life and destiny and I am certainly not like sheep. But we are like sheep and our greatest need is to have a shepherd.

... And God provides a shepherd for us in the person of Jesus Christ. We human beings are sheep and what we need most is a shepherd and that shepherd is Jesus Christ. A personal relationship is formed between the good shepherd and the sheep. The shepherd knows the sheep's name and Jesus Christ, the good shepherd, knows your name. Christ knows you, your name and the sound of your voice. We often hear that we Christians are to have a

personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and sometimes, that begins to sound like a cliché. But there is truth to the description that Jesus is the shepherd. God wants us to have a strong relationship with Jesus Christ, our good shepherd.

Walter Brueggemann in his book *The Message of the Psalms* begins his commentary on Psalm 23 with these words (see page 156):

“It is almost pretentious to comment on this psalm. The grip it has on biblical spirituality is deep and genuine. It is such a simple statement that it can bear its own witness without comment. It is, of course, a psalm of confidence. It recounts in detail by means of rich metaphors a life lived in trustful receptivity of God’s gifts. It is God’s companionship that transforms every situation. It does not mean that there are no deathly valleys, no enemies, but they are not capable of hurt. Psalm 23 knows that evil is present in the world, but it is not feared. Confidence in God is the source of a life of peace and joy.”

As we journey through life, the message that comes to us most fully when we trust God. The Good News of Jesus Christ comes into our lives, despite the tortuous anguish of tragedies. God sent Christ into our world to reaffirm hope.

We have read those words again this morning: *“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers. Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”* (John 10:4-6)

Jesus Christ is the “good shepherd” sent by God. God is with us in our pain seeking us out and rescuing us! God binds up our injuries and strengthens those of us who are weak.

God cares for all who are lost ... for all who are weak! In our world today there are families that are deeply damaged by everyday arguments and hopeless conflict. There are those individuals who are so incapacitated in their minds and bodies that they can no longer survive. There are those who are maimed so

severely that there is no thought beyond today. God seeks to care through the “Good Shepherd” and the model of Christ life-giving love. There are those who are fragile and need to be strengthened. There are those who are spiritually exhausted, who seek direction and sincerity of belief. There are those who are fatigued in mind and need the simple support of a listening friend. There are those families who have lost loved ones and have found that in all their hurt and grief they are not separated from the presence and love of God.

Jesus says to all and to us, “I know my own and my own know me, ...” (10:14) That is the Good News that comes to us through Jesus Christ. ***Come to Me and I Will Show You the Way*** ... that is what the Psalm and the words of Jesus are telling us. Where does Jesus, our good shepherd, lead us? We are led to green pastures and still water; to the Bible, the Word, and the renewing of the Sacraments. We are nourished by the spiritual sustenance of the green pastures. The good shepherd, Jesus, also leads us in the paths of righteousness for his name sake.

There is a story told that during World War II the famous American pilot, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, was flying on a special mission to the Pacific Islands. The plane crashed, and Rickenbacker and his crew were lost at sea for 21 days. Rickenbacker wrote of that experience: “In the beginning many of the men were atheists or agnostics, but at the end of the terrible ordeal each, in his own way, discovered God. Each man found God in the vast, empty loneliness of the ocean. Each man found salvation and strength in prayer, and a community of feeling developed which created a liveliness of human fellowship and worship, and a sense of gentle peace.”

Our hearts are strangely warmed, are they not, when we hear Rickenbacker say that “each man, in his own way, discovered God” on his own terms.

In a few moments we will sing the hymn written by Joseph Gilmore a graduate of my seminary. It was 1862 and the darkest days of the Civil War. He wrote that he had been in his first few weeks at the First Baptist Church in Philadelphia and he sought to

give an explanation of Psalm 23. “I did not get further than the words ‘He Leadeth Me.’

Those words took hold of me as they had never done before, and I saw them in a significance and wondrous beauty of which I had never dreamed. I did not refer to that fact—that is, I don’t think I did—but it may subconsciously have led me to realize that God’s leadership is the one significant fact in human experience, that it makes no difference how we are led, or whither we are led, so long as we are sure God is leading us.

At the close of the meeting a few of us in the parlor of my host, good Deacon Wattson, kept on talking about the thought which I had emphasized; ... and then and there, on a blank page of the brief from which I had intended to speak, I penciled the hymn, talking and writing at the same time, then handed it to my wife and thought no more about it.”

Unbeknownst to Rev. Gilmore his wife had sent the words to a publisher and some years later he picked up a hymnal at another church and here was his hymn. There are the words for our days today ...

*He leadeth me, O blessed thought!  
O words with heav’nly comfort fraught!  
Whate’er I do, where’er I be  
Still ’tis God’s hand that leadeth me.*

Scriptures: Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

**“The Shepherd’s Psalm ...  
*Do Not Fear the Valley*”**

*“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”* –Psalm 23:4

**Psalms 23 (Native American Version)**

The Great Father above a shepherd Chief is.

I am His and with Him I want not.

He throws out to me a rope and the name of the rope is love

and He draws me to where the grass is green

and the water not dangerous,

And I eat and lie down and am satisfied.

Sometimes my heart is very weak and falls down

but He lifts me up again and draws me into a good road.

His name is Wonderful!

Sometime, it may be very soon, it may be a long, long time.

He will draw me into a valley.

It is dark there, but I’ll be afraid not,

for it is in between those mountains

that the Shepherd Christ will meet me

and the hunger that I have in my heart

all through this life will be satisfied.

He gives me a staff to lean upon.

He spreads a table before me with all kinds of foods.

He puts His hand upon my head and all the “tired” is gone.

My cup He fills till it runs over. What I tell is true. I lie not.

These roads that are “away ahead” will stay with me

through this life and after;

And afterwards I will go to live in the Big Tepee

and sit down with the Shepherd Chief forever.

*Prayer: Lord, you are invisible, hid from our eyes. At times we wish we could see you more clearly, that we didn't have to rely so much on the unseen and the unheard. We long for the day we can see you face to face. Lord, teach us to trust. Amen.*

Finding yourself in a deep valley can be a time of immense fear of what lies ahead ... or marvelous wonder at the green pastures.

In late July, Ellen and I spent a few days touring Canyon De Chelly. We were mesmerized by the breathtaking beauty and power of water and wind to create such beauty. We had no idea how much people depended upon that valley for the raising of crops, especially fruits and grains, which otherwise would not be available in the high desert. We also learned some of the tragic history, and I hope what I am about to say is reasonably accurate.

Approximately one thousand years ago, members of the Navajo tribe migrated into the Southwest to what was call the Dineh Nation. These were traditional hunters and gathers, and they were driven by the supply of available water and food. The Navajo were followed by the Pueblo and Hopi peoples. In 1849, the Donovan Treaty was signed by representatives of the U. S. Government and three chiefs represented the Navajo peoples. Life in northern New Mexico and Arizona was stable until near the end of the civil war.

At that time the United States government sent Colonial Christopher "Kit" Carson to clear the Dineh region so that mining interest could begin exploring new territory.

In January 1864, Kit Carson led almost four hundred soldiers into Canyon De Chelly to capture the remaining Navajo living in the valley. Deep snow covered the mesa and valley below and for sixteen days, the soldiers burned the hogans, tore down the corrals, destroyed food supplies, and filled up water holes with rocks and dirt. Kit Carson made camp and waited for the Navajos to surrender. Many people surrendered except for three hundred who

were at the bottom of Fortress Rock and after a few weeks this group surrendered.

By March of 1864, more than five thousand Navajo prisoners began the long trek to Fort Sumner in the territory of New Mexico, which became known as “The Long Walk.” For the captives the moccasins fell apart, clothes and blankets turned to rags, snow fell, and people became sick and died. Half way through the march the people had to cross the Rio Grande River and more people died. Over three thousand Navajos died on “The Long Walk” and this is part of our American history that is so difficult to read and hear.

Yet, in the version written by Navajo people of Psalm 23, we are invited into a deeper understanding when it says, *“He throws out to me a rope and the name of the rope is love and He draws me to where the grass is green and the water not dangerous, and I eat and lie down and am satisfied. Sometimes my heart is very weak and falls down but He lifts me up again and draws me into a good road. His name is Wonderful!”*

This has been written from the perspective of the valley we call Canyon DeChelly and “The Long Walk.” It is almost surprising that the Navajo people came and volunteered during World War II in what we know to be the Code Talkers that may have saved the U.S. Pacific fleet. And ... so many of our Native Americans are Christian believers and they no longer have ***To Fear the Valley.***

In what we experience every day we have so many friends who are fighting to walk through valleys of shadows of death. We watch the news and hear stories of nameless people who are journeying through periods of homelessness, crisis in foreclosure, and worry. Maybe it took a disease to scare you, a phone call from the police late at night, or a letter on a kitchen counter that said, “I’m not coming back.”

Yet, it is Halloween season and I often ask why would people elect to be terrified by film or haunted house? I wonder if it builds within those who seek the Halloween thrill a kind of courage that if they can survive the fake terrors, they will be able to survive the real ones when they come. The late psychologist Rollo May has

written, “Humans are the strangest of all of God’s creatures, because they run fastest when they have lost their way.” This is how we get into real trouble ... by running when we are lost ... by having *Fear of the Valley*.

When we compare Psalm 23 to the other Psalms, there is a huge difference in the message that is shared. For some Psalms we read the terrible cry of the author who suffered. But in Psalm 23 all is calm and serene and we come to appreciate that God is our shepherd and we do not want. This shepherd makes us to lie down in green pasture and leads us along the quiet waters of everlasting righteousness. It is my soul ... and your souls ... that are restored from misery and tragedy in life. God, our shepherd, knows his own and calls them by name.

Then we come to verse 4 ... *“I am not even disturbed when walking through the valley of the shadow of death!” Or as we have read today “He will draw me into a valley. It is dark there, but I’ll be afraid not, for it is in between those mountains that the Shepherd Christ will meet me and the hunger that I have in my heart all through this life will be satisfied.”* The shepherd is here in the valley ... we are supported by the shepherd’s unique care and love. The shepherd “... will comfort me with his rod and his staff.” All through our life we are walking through the valley of death, and its shadow is continually cast upon us.

Author Ellen Bergh has shared a powerful story. (see Ellen Bergh, “What Lies Ahead?” *Upper Room*, September/October 1993, 65). “Amtrak’s Coast Starlight train was filled with excited passengers, craning their necks to enjoy the Oregon scenery as the train rolled through green forests. A shining lake gleamed through the trees, and cheerful conversation filled the air. Suddenly, the light, airy feeling was gone, like a candle blown out in a draft as they entered a tunnel. Expecting the sun to reappear quickly, I was uncomfortable as it became even darker. The happy sounds were a thing of the past. Everyone sat in awe of the inky blackness. The longer they traveled in the tunnel, the harder it was to remain calm without any visual cues to reassure them. Even the movement of the train seemed to fall away into pitch darkness. When they came out of the tunnel, laughter and relief filled the compartment.”

Ellen later wrote: “My life in Christ is like that unforgettable train ride. Events may plunge me into darkness where I have no clues to sense the Lord’s presence. Yet I can trust God is with me even when I can’t see what lies ahead.”

As we move from verse four to verse five the scene shifts and the Lord is pictured as a hospitable host, preparing a table with food and drink, and anointing the head of the visitor. We often read this with “Christian eyes” and see a reference to the Last Supper and the renewal that comes with the Celebration of Communion. We hear in these words a wonderful message of trust for our times and through our Lord Jesus Christ. In response to the daily news reports of fighting and assaults on our streets, threats of terror, and crimes against helpless groups in our society ... in all this they can proclaim the abiding, merciful, and persistent presence of God, our source of lasting comfort and security.

God’s alternative to the deep valley of fear is love. To use the words of Henri Nouwen: “Hardly a day passes in our lives without our experience of inner or outer fears, anxieties, apprehensions and preoccupations. These dark powers have pervaded every part of our world to such a degree that we can never fully escape them. Still it is possible not to belong to these powers, not to build our dwelling place among them, but to choose the house of love as our home.”

Jesus Christ is the one who calms the waters, is our Good Shepherd, and offers us his love in the midst of our anxious fear. Jesus says to us: “Make your home in me, as I make my home in you.” ... “... to choose the house of love. ...” Jesus Christ of the Gospel story came to change our world, came to bring a renewing sense of love ... a reality of love that casts out all fear.

In making him our home, we find our grateful center. As we unpack the boxes and settle in, we move from the clutches of fear to the joy of gratitude. It is often in an experience of the unexpected that the Spirit of God breaks into those habits of heart and mind that keep us from knowing our personal experience of joyous gratitude.

So it is with our Lord Jesus Christ, who leads us through the troubled and difficult times of life. But there is a reason, a purpose and that is to lead us to greener pastures of deeper trust and faith. He calls us to trust in him, to put our faith in him, even when we can't always see or understand his plan or purpose. We trust the Good Shepherd, because we know the shepherd is trustworthy.

None of us gets out of life without walking through the valley, it is still only a valley, a passageway, a temporary condition. The valley of the shadow of death is something we go through. Valleys are not resting places, but passageways. We can walk through our problems and we can face our sorrows. We can walk through our pains and we can face through our mistakes.

What Psalm 23 promises us is that in all these journeys, God will walk through with us, God will walk beside us. Some of us have gotten lost in our battles against declining health. Others are lost in grief and the massive hurt of loosing a life partner. And how many of us are just simply lost in our shame for things done or left undone? Trying so hard to find ourselves, we have even lost sight of who we are, who we were created to be.

The reason both the psalmist and Jesus spent so much time describing us as lost was not to judge us, but to help us find our salvation and reassurance in life. That is how David survived the valley of the shadow of death when he was on the run from Saul. That is the hope that rises out of the rubble of collapsed towers in New York.

Believing God is with us is how relief workers at the mine site in Chile made it through another day of caring. That image of still waters and green pastures is so refreshing and peaceful and reassuring. It is a place that we can ... and we would love to spend our whole lives in. Wouldn't you? There is just one little problem though.

That's not what life is all about, but we no longer have to ***Fear the Valleys.***

Scriptures: Psalm 23; Luke 8:22-25

## **“The Shepherd’s Psalm ... *My Care Runs Over!*”**

*“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” – Psalm 23:6*

### **Psalm 23 (New Jerusalem Bible)**

Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

In grassy meadows he lets me be.

By tranquil streams he leads me to restore my spirit.

He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name.

Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death

I should fear no danger, for you are at my side.

Your staff and your crook are there to soothe me.

You prepare a table for me under the eyes of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup brims over.

Kindness and faithful love pursue me every day of my life.

I make my home in the house of Yahweh for all time to come

Prayer: *Holy God, we come this morning to be with you, to sit together in your presence, and to listen together for the word you have for us. Silence in us any voice but your own, and help us to know again the power of your redeeming love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

One of my favorite stories about the 23rd Psalm concerns a retreat when the group gathered for closing worship. The leader asked if anyone would recite the Psalm for the group. A man in his mid-30s raised his hand and with a deep bass voice and handsome appearance he began to recite flawlessly the Psalm. The

power and tone of his voice captured the audience and when he had finished, the entire group rose to their feet and applauded.

The leader then asked if anyone else would like to recite the Psalm. Another hand went up and it was the hand of a much older man. Looking very frail because of his chemo treatments and bent over with age, he slowly made his way to the microphone. His voice was trembled and even cracked ... and when he finished a dramatic silence fell over the group and no one spoke and no one applauded. Tears could be seen streaming down the cheeks of many.

The younger man stood up and said, "I noticed something here. When I quoted the Psalm you all stood and applauded. When this man quoted the Psalm, you all sat in silence and no one applauded and why is that? I think I know the difference... I know the Psalm ... but this man knows the Shepherd."

This is the message we all need to hear and it goes beyond the words to the story of the One whose *Care Runs Over ... and Over ... and Over!*

I am now in my fourth week of reading over and over again Psalm 23 and then studying as many resources that I can find. I decided to re-read the David story, the author ascribed to this text. I have seen pictures of the amazing statue by Michelangelo, an astonishing expression of physical beauty and strength. The sculpture is a tribute to Israel's love for its greatest king. David ... the BELOVED ONE, was how he was known.

I know the history after all I am named after him. So, I read about David as a young boy and then as the great King. Actually, David's story is a lot better than most paperbacks you can pick up at the local CVS.

You know the story: David was a close friend of the King's son, Jonathan and slayer of Goliath. David is the king, a national hero, adored, and protégé of Saul. King David was a strong military leader and smart politician. He was a poet and musician, who wrote many of the Psalms.

Then there is the sexy part when David saw beautiful Bathsheba bathing on the roof and he was stirred by her beauty.

The King sent for her while her husband is off on military orders and engaged in sexual passions with her. Not long after, Bathsheba sends word to the king, ... two words actually, "I'm pregnant."

Uriah, her husband, is a loyal military officer in David's army and he was carrying out his duties to the king. David, in the best tradition of politics, devises a plan for damage control to disguise the truth. Uriah is summoned from the front and sent home to sleep with his wife. But Uriah, dutiful servant of the King, declines and sleeps at the King's door. More creative damage control and David offers Uriah drinks, hoping that will inspire him to spend the night with Bathsheba. Finally, David sent Uriah back to battle, carrying his orders to place him at the front in the worst fighting and then to pull back so that Uriah would be killed.

Brueggemann asks at this point, "Is there nothing to which David will not stoop for the cover up? Is there no shame?" (see *David's Truth*, p. 60-61)

Enter God in the voice of the prophet, Nathan. The prophet told David about a powerful man who stole a poor man's sheep, and looked David in the eye, "You are the man." David was caught and David repents and was filled with remorse. Regret and confession comes when his back is against the wall. Cable news today would probably characterize this apology as cynical, because David had been engaged in spin control, outright lies, and even murder.

King David genuinely confessed his sin and was forgiven. David lived all his days with the memory of his shame. Israel now knows more about its king than it wants to know: his humanness, his stupidity, his selfishness, and his sin. God's love for David creates a new being, a new situation, and a stronger leader of the nation of Israel. David, flawed as he was, continues to lead the nation and to know the amazing grace of God, who will not let him go. It is with this background that we read that "... God who will be with him even in the valley of the shadow of death."

That's the story, which brings this Psalm close to how we understand ourselves and our life together. Forgiveness is not just

a theory or therapeutic technique. We believe Jesus Christ, came for the forgiveness of sins, we believe that forgiveness is of God ... and that we are called to forgive as we have been forgiven. We know it, but when the offense is real forgiveness is never easy.

Or in the words of our text this morning, *“Surely goodness and loving kindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”* (Psalm 23:6)

Somehow the image of God as Shepherd ... or Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd ... moves into real life for you and me ... with the gracious gift of loving kindness and the forgiveness of God.

God is in the Psalm as the Shepherd whose ***Care Runs Over!*** Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd whose ***Care Runs Over ... and Over ... and Over!***

This Psalm is written to us in the same spirit of assurance and the Lord knows where the grass is and where the waters are. The Lord knows where the quiet is and that’s where the Lord is leading. We are the ones who benefit by these promising words. God led the Israelites out of Egypt and there they stand, immediately before the Red Sea, and Pharaoh behind them with his host. They cried out, “Why did you do this, to bring us here into this impossible place?” No, “The Lord is my shepherd,” and He will care of us.

This Psalm gives us an assurance concerning our futures. Our God is the one whose ***Care Runs Over ... and Over ... and Over!*** For me the most important words are “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” Or from the Jerusalem Bible: “Kindness and faithful love pursue me every day of my life. I make my home in the house of Yahweh for all time to come.

These words are the source of our confidence and the foundations of our all hopes.

A little boy was eagerly looking forward to the birthday party of a friend who lived only a few blocks away. When the day arrived, a blizzard made the sidewalks nearly impassable. The boy’s father, sensing the danger, hesitated to let his son go and the youngster reacted tearfully. “But Dad,” he pleaded, “all the other

kids will be there. Their parents are letting them go.” The father thought for a minute, then replied softly, “All right, you may go.”

Surprised but overjoyed, the boy bundled up and walked out into the raging snow storm that made visibility almost impossible, and it took him more than half an hour to trudge the short distance to the party. As he rang the doorbell, he turned briefly to look out into the storm and his eye caught a shadow ... it was his father. Dad had followed his son’s every step to make sure he arrived safely. So it is with the Lord who is our shepherd!

So often, someone will honestly but hurtfully ask me, “If God is good, why is there evil and brokenness in the world?” Humankind simply has very often chosen the wrong path to follow. Have you ever thought about asking the question “Where does all the goodness come from?”

God is always working in your lives and mine ... with goodness, compassion and Care that ***Runs Over ... and Over ... and Over!*** Yes, the good work of Psalm 23 is not finished until it finds a place in the deepest chambers of our hearts ... and our thirst is quenched ... and our hungers and desires and longings have been set free to love God. It is then that you and I know we are valued and loved. This is what makes us a faith community, going forward in ministry and mission in the days ahead.

“Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.”

Scriptures: Psalm 23; John 11:21-27