

Title: Walking with Hope

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Text: [John 10:1-11, 27-28a](#) and [Psalm 23](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



The animals are taking over. That's likely an exaggeration but they are having a moment. Have you seen the pictures of them reclaiming public spaces? With streets empty because of shelter-in-place orders, all around the world, there are wildlife sightings. Coyotes are roaming the waterfront of San Francisco and kangaroos are

hopping down the streets of Adelaide. Penguins are walking through Capetown, a herd of Great Orme goats are sauntering in Conway, Wales, and wild pumas in Santiago, Chile.¹

One of my favorites is the flock of sheep that wandered onto a children's playground in Preston, England. They were playing on the merry-go-round. It's an amazing scene with them using it like it was their treadmill. I had two thoughts. I didn't know sheep liked merry-go-rounds. And, where was their shepherd when they needed him? He may have been taking the video which you can watch on YouTube.² But that question is also one for us today. Where is the good shepherd when you need him?

It's a good question for today because if there is a time when we need to hear the voice of our shepherd, it is right now. And it's a good question because this is Shepherd Sunday. On the third Sunday after Easter, Christians around the world remember that Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11) He promises that if we follow him, he will give us eternal life and we will never perish. (John 10:27-28a)

For the early followers of Jesus, this was the image by which they remembered Jesus. It wasn't with his arms stretched out, suffering and dying on a cross. That didn't show up until the 4th century. The earliest representations of Jesus were as a shepherd. Go to the catacombs where Christians worshipped in fear for their lives, afraid that if exposed, they might suffer and die. You don't see pictures of Jesus on a cross. He's the Good Shepherd, leading his sheep. Often, he's not just leading. He is carrying a lamb on his shoulders. Jesus is the good shepherd and his sheep

know his voice. They follow him and know they will never perish. It was how they were walking in hope.

I'm confident they quickly made a connection with a passage of scripture that we turn to when we are discouraged or when we are suffering and when we are afraid. The 23rd Psalm. There is a reason that it is read at just about every funeral service you go to. People need hope to move forward. There is a reason that people recite it before going into surgery. It offers hope in a positive outcome. There is a reason it has been called the foxhole Psalm. It gives hope for safety. For over 3000 years, the 23rd Psalm has helped people walk with hope. It gave them the confidence to face the future knowing that it will be better than the present circumstances.

The 23rd Psalm was and is a description of the life of Jesus and a life with Jesus even though it was written by David 1000 years before the birth of Jesus. Let me say that again. The most famous Psalm in the bible can be used as a description of the life of Jesus as well as a life with Jesus. I think you'll see it once I point something out about this Psalm. At the very least, you'll see why, during times of suffering, when life is hard and we are afraid, we turn to it.

A wonderful Old Testament scholar named Walter Brueggeman pointed out, in his book, *The Spirituality of the Psalms*, that the Psalms fall into three seasons or rhythms of life. Orientation, Disorientation, and Re-Orientation. Each of these movements exemplifies a part of our lives. They are the natural rhythm of human experience.³ And one of the powerful things about the 23rd Psalm is you can see all three of these seasons in the six verses. Let's look and see

The first season is orientation. Orientation is when everything feels right; when things are going well. You feel settled in a season of orientation. Things are ordered. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." (Palm 23:1) Other translations say I lack nothing. You have all you need to feel good about your life. This time in the life of Jesus was his early ministry.

One of my favorite teachers called the first three years of Jesus' ministry, the Galilean spring. It was filled with joy and abundance with more and more people following him. Jesus was performing miracles and amazing people with his preaching and teaching. Life couldn't get any better. It was lush time, with green pastures and refreshing waters. Every step they took seemed like the right path. It felt great; life was good.

We know that feeling. Many of us were living in that season until March came. Our country was experiencing a season of incredible prosperity.

Unemployment was really low and the stock market was setting records. Consumer confidence was high. People had a lot of hope. In a season of orientation, life is good; it feels great until it doesn't any longer.

What happens? A season of disorientation arrives and suddenly you find yourself walking through a dark valley or as the old King James version says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." (Psalm 23:4a) Both are right. A literal interpretation of the Hebrew would be "the deepest, darkest, shadow-of-death like a valley." That's a good definition of disorientation. Disorientation is when life feels difficult, dark, and broken; it is a season of anguish, tears, and despair.

Sometimes, it is because you do something that you bring on yourself. Jesus did. He willingly leaves that season of orientation in Galilee and heads to Jerusalem. He walks into his disorientation, into his shadow of death valley in Jerusalem, knowing it leads to the cross. Why? Because Jesus is "...the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11) In Jerusalem, he spreads a table in the presence of his enemies, he was anointed, and his cup overflowed with the grief, so overwhelming that he prays to God to lift the cup from him. This was Jesus' season of disorientation and you can readily see it in Psalm 23.

But sometimes, a season of disorientation just happens. The Psalms are full of examples of this. There were wars, famines, and sickness. And of course, you see the point. Our current season of disorientation is the COVID-19 pandemic and it is a "deepest, darkest, shadow-of-death like valley" that we are walking through. With it are all sorts of disorientation from loss of jobs to missing schools and graduations, to stress on marriages and children and of course, death, too much death. And there, is in this season of disorientation, fear. The Psalm allows for that. It doesn't say, "I will not fear." It says, "I will fear no evil." There is a difference.

It doesn't say I will not feel sadness or grieve horrifically or suffer depression or even fear the worst possible outcome. It says I will fear no evil. It doesn't say I won't get the coronavirus or my worst nightmare will not happen. It says I will fear no evil.

There is something within each of us, something primal and ancient that fears the force of evil, fears a power that causes terrible and awful things to happen to us. ⁴ The Good Shepherd calls this force a thief. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10) Fear of evil, fear of the cause, fear of "why is this happening to me," brings anxiety and destroys trust. It keeps us from trusting the Lord. It keeps us from the abundant life that the Good

Shepherd offers. So we will not fear evil because we trust that “your rod and your staff— they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4b)

That direction, that comfort is who God is for us amid disorientation. The Good Shepherd is leading, directing, guiding through whatever dark valley they were going through, and with the promise that on the other side is new life. It is re-orientation when God pulls us out of the brokenness of life and helps us find that place of joy and gratitude for deliverance. Reorientation is where “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” (Psalm 23:6)

For Jesus, that place of reorientation was Easter; it was the new life of resurrection. For the early followers of Jesus, they were able to see that God had indeed led Jesus through that valley of death to new life and God would do the same for them. Even though life was tough, they knew they would experience goodness and mercy and dwell with him forever. They could walk with hope that a season of reorientation was in the future, confident that the future will be better than the present circumstances.

And that truth is ours as well. To proclaim that surely goodness and mercy will be ours, that we will be with God is the only way to walk through this time. Walking in hope believes that sometime in a few weeks, a few months, maybe even a few years, life will be better than the present. God is capable and able to deliver us if we put our trust in the Good Shepherd. He will welcome us on the other side of this valley to another place of green pastures and still waters.

Which brings us back to the question of the day. Where is the shepherd when you need him? He’s here, in the 23rd Psalm, a description of the life of Jesus and our life with Jesus. May I offer a suggestion. This week, when you are washing your hands, which we are all doing a lot, instead of singing Happy Birthday recite the 23rd Psalm.

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 right paths for his name's sake.
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
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
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.

Do that this week and you’ll find yourself walking with hope.

¹ <https://www.insider.com/photos-show-animals-roaming-empty-streets-during-coronavirus-lockdowns-2020-4#and-the-georgia-aquarium-opened-its-doors-to-adorable-foster-puppies-taking-them-on-a-playdate-with-their-underwater-friends-10>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZs9sdzvdS4>

³ Bruggemann, Walter. Spirituality of the Psalms.

⁴ <https://resources.seedbed.com/daily-text-psalm-23-series/>