

## The Shepherd who walks with us.

Bible reference for sermon: Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

There are some passages of Scripture that everyone seems to know. John 3:16 is one of them and Psalm 23 is another - one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. We hear it at funerals. We hear it when people are seriously ill. We hear it in hospital rooms and at times of grief. Many of us could probably say some of its words without having the Bible open in front of us:

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters." "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me." And perhaps most familiar of all: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."*

Because we know these words so well, there is a danger that we can stop hearing them. They can become words we know rather than words we experience. But Psalm 23 is not simply a beautiful poem about sheep, green grass and peaceful streams. It is a profound statement of faith from someone who has experienced the realities of life. The psalmist knows that life contains both green pastures and dark valleys. There is abundance, but there is also fear. There is rest, but there is also danger. There is nourishment, but there are also enemies. And through all of it, the psalmist discovers one central truth: God is present. That is the heart of this psalm. That when we walk through the valleys of illness, grief, anxiety and despair, God walks with us.

The psalm begins:

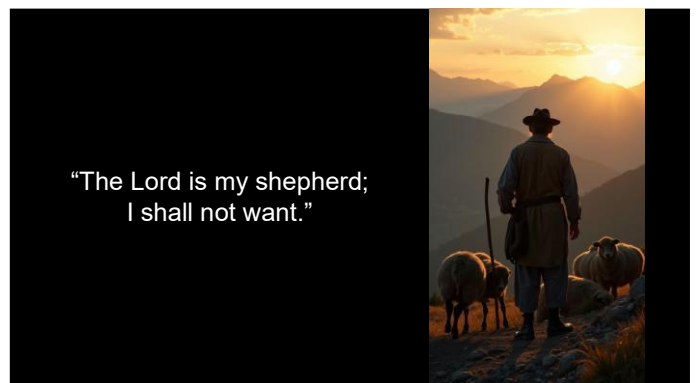
*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."*

We can sometimes hear this as a promise that God will give us everything we want.

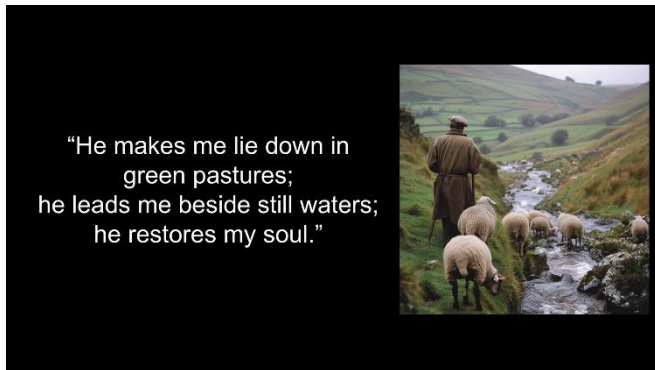
But that is not what the psalm is saying. It is a statement of trust. The Lord is my shepherd.

Therefore, I can trust that I will be cared for. In the ancient world, a shepherd was responsible for the life and wellbeing of the flock. The shepherd found food and water. The shepherd watched for danger. The shepherd stayed with the sheep. To call God a shepherd is to say that

God is not distant from us. God is involved in our lives. God cares about our wellbeing. God knows when we are tired or frightened or when we have lost our way.



And God does not simply stand at a distance and tell us which direction to go. Our loving shepherd walks with us. Into those beautiful images of green pastures and still waters.



*"He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul."*

So often in life we feel like we have to just keep going. Keep working. Keep achieving. Keep busy. Keep producing. Keep up with everyone else.

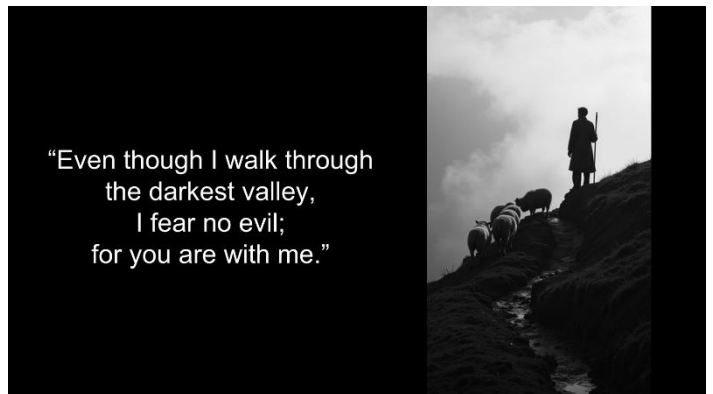
And sometimes we carry that same attitude into our faith. Maybe we imagine that being a

faithful Christian means constantly doing something for God.

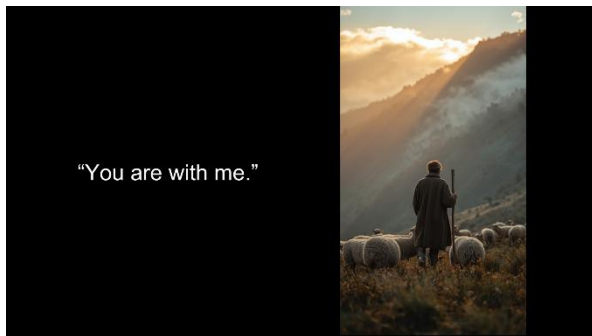
Psalm 23 begins with something different. The sheep are invited to lie down. To rest. To receive. To be nourished. Perhaps some of us need to hear that today. You do not always have to be strong. You do not always have to have the answers. You do not always have to be the person who looks after everyone else. Sometimes faith means allowing yourself to be cared for. To be restored. The idea behind restoration carries the sense of bringing something back to life, reviving it, refreshing it. Perhaps there are times when our souls become tired, our bodies are tired, our minds are tired, our hearts are tired. We may have been carrying something for a very long time. And the good news of Psalm 23 is that God cares about those places within us. God is interested not only in what we do, but in who we are. God is concerned with our whole selves. Our bodies. Our minds. Our relationships. Our hopes. Our fears. Our souls. Even, and especially, when life takes an unexpected turn. After the green pastures and still waters comes the valley.

*"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me."*

We know the valleys of life, don't we. The valleys that are part of being human. Illness, grief, loneliness, uncertainty. There are times when we are afraid for ourselves or for someone we love. There are times when we simply do not know what lies ahead. And sometimes people try to help us by telling us to look on the bright side. They want to take away our sadness. They want to fix our problems. They want to make the darkness disappear. But sometimes the most healing thing another person can do is simply to be present. To sit beside us. To listen. To stay.



Psalm 23 tells us that this is what God does. God does not abandon us in the valley. God walks with us through it.



If you look at the form of the psalm, you'll notice that in the first three verses, the psalmist speaks about God:

*"He makes me lie down..."*

*"He leads me..."*

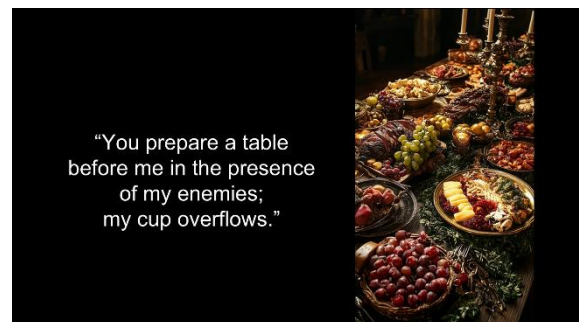
*"He restores my soul..."*

But when the psalmist enters the valley, the language changes. Suddenly it becomes: *"You are with me."* The valley brings the psalmist into a more intimate relationship with God.

The God who was spoken about is now spoken to. *"You are with me."* Its beauty is in its simplicity. The simplicity of the faith that God gives to each of us. Faith does not always mean certainty about the future. Sometimes faith is simply trusting that we do not walk into the future alone. And this trust, this intimate relationship with God is transformed as the shepherd becomes a host.

*"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; my cup overflows."*

What an image! The enemies are still present. The difficulties have not magically disappeared. But in the midst of them, God sets a table. God says: There is still a place for you here. You are welcome. You belong. You are not forgotten. Your life is more than your illness. Your identity is more than your grief. Your worth is more than your usefulness. Your future is more than your present circumstances. You have a place at God's table. This becomes especially meaningful for us as we gather around the table of Holy Communion. Here we receive bread and wine. Simple gifts. Ordinary things. Yet through these ordinary things, Christ meets us. We come because we need Christ. We come because we are hungry for grace. We come because we need forgiveness. We come because we need strength. We come because we need to remember that we belong to God. And perhaps today some of us come carrying particular burdens. We may bring physical pain. We may bring emotional exhaustion. We may bring grief. We may bring anxiety about the future. We may bring concern for someone we love. We may bring things that nobody else knows about.



And the invitation of Christ is not: "Sort yourself out before you come."

It is: "Come." Come to the table. Receive. Be nourished. Be reminded that you are loved. Just as the shepherd walks with us through the valleys of life, so Christ is present with us in this meal. We receive the bread and wine as gifts of God's grace, and we are reminded that Christ comes to us in the midst of ordinary human life. We come as we are. We come with our faith and our doubts. We come with our strength and our weakness. We come with gratitude and with questions. We come with joy and with sorrow. And there is room for all of it at God's table.

And in this psalm the table appears as we walk through the valley. The meal is prepared. There is nourishment in the midst of uncertainty. There is grace in the midst of brokenness. There is a place for us even when we feel that we have no place.

And finally the psalm says:

*"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."*

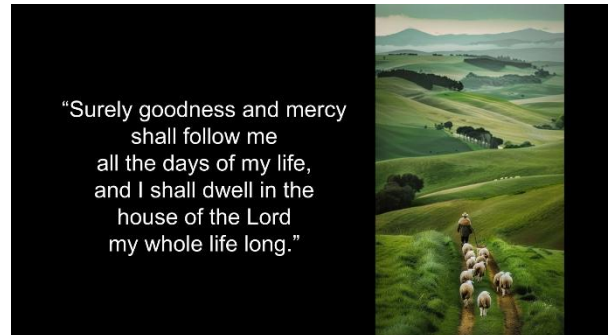
The Hebrew word translated "follow" can also carry the sense of *pursue*. That gives us a wonderful image. God's goodness and mercy are not simply trailing along behind us.

They are pursuing us. Chasing after us. Seeking us out. Even when we are tired or frightened or have wandered. Even when we cannot feel God's

presence, goodness and mercy are still pursuing us. In life we may sometimes feel that we have lost God. But Psalm 23 tells us that God's love has not lost us. God is still there.

Walking beside us. Leading us. Restoring us.

Preparing a table for us. And bringing us home.



So perhaps today, as we hear this familiar psalm, we can hear it with new ears.

If life is good for you at the moment, receive the green pastures and still waters with gratitude. If you are tired, allow yourself to rest. If you are grieving, know that you do not have to pretend that everything is fine. If you are walking through a dark valley, hear the promise: "You are with me." And if you are seeking healing, come with whatever you carry. Come to the table. Receive the bread. Receive the wine. Receive the grace of Christ. Allow yourself to be held for a moment by the love of God.

For the Lord is our shepherd. We are not promised a life without valleys, but we are promised that we will never have to walk through them alone. And so, whatever today holds, we can walk forward with the confidence of the psalmist: *"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."* Amen.

Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page <https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>