

SHEEP

Psalm 23; John 10:11-16

A sermon by Peter Budd

Sunday 28th August 2022, 10 am Emmanuel, 11 am St. Andrew's Cheadle Hulme

Over the summer we've been looking at some of the Psalms.

Today we have Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd.

Even if we don't know anything else from the Bible,

the chances are that we've come across this psalm.

Many, many people have found it to be enormously comforting

in the situations they face in life.

Psalm 23 is described as "A Psalm of David."

David, the king of Israel and ancestor of Jesus,

who, as a boy, looked after his father's sheep.

David knew all about being a shepherd.

He knew all about sheep.

And as the Psalm opens, it's written from the perspective of sheep.

So to really understand it, we need to think like sheep.

We need to think like sheep,

not quite like the sheep we see in English fields,

or even the hefted sheep we see out on the fells,

but Middle Eastern sheep,

who will follow their shepherd to find good grazing,

who need to be taken to clean water to drink.

So let's imagine ourselves as sheep:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing

If we're like sheep, we need a shepherd.

Not a bad shepherd,

who doesn't care whether we have enough to eat,

who doesn't treat us when we pick up parasites or get diseases,

who doesn't protect us from predators that would hurt us or kill us.

Not a bad shepherd,

but a good shepherd,

who makes sure we have enough to eat,

who's concerned for our well-being,

who keeps us safe.

He makes me lie down in green pastures

If we're like sheep, it isn't easy to make us lie down.

We won't lie down if we're hungry.

We won't lie down if we're irritated by flies.

We won't lie down if we're nervous.

And we're very nervous creatures.

We'll only lie down when we're content.
A good shepherd brings us to lush pastures.
And when the good shepherd is present, we can be content.

he leads me beside quiet waters

If we're like sheep, we can go a long time without drinking,
so long as we get a good early-morning chomp on dew-laden grass.
But in a hot climate, we need water.
And if we see water, we'll go for it.

It doesn't matter to us if water is dirty or muddy or contaminated with the eggs of parasites.
We'll drink it.
But a good shepherd will take us to good water.
Life-giving water.

he refreshes my soul

If we're like sheep, we can sometimes get ourselves into the most unfortunate situations.
We lie down in a nice, comfortable hollow.
We relax and stretch and roll.
But then, when we try to get up, we can't.
We just lie there on our backs – helpless.
We're what's called "cast".
And if we stay like that too long, we die.

A good shepherd looks out for us when we're "cast" or "cast down".
A good shepherd will roll us over and lift us up.
Rub our limbs to restore circulation.
Help us until we can walk again.
A good shepherd refreshes us, gets us moving.

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake

If we're like sheep, left to ourselves we'll graze and graze until there's nothing left.
We're destructive.
Left to ourselves, we'll stick to our favourite places.
Even though they're a breeding ground for infection.
A good shepherd guides us into fresh pastures.
Moves us on.

***Even though I walk through the darkest valley
– the valley of the shadow of death –
I will fear no evil, for you are with me***

Some of the best pastures are in the most inaccessible places.
The shepherd may take us through a dark and threatening valley,
because that's the way to the verdant mountain meadows.

We may not like those dark valleys.
The dangers are real.
Predators may lurk amongst the rocks.
Flash floods may come tearing down the slopes.

But a good shepherd is aware.
A good shepherd will lead us through.
With a good shepherd, we need fear no evil.

your rod and your staff, they comfort me

Our shepherd doesn't need many tools do his job.
A rod and a staff.

A rod – a club worn at the belt –
used to defend against predators,
and perhaps, too, to discipline us.
A staff – a long stick, with a crook or hook at one end –
used to guide us and catch us and draw us close.
And perhaps to help extract us
when, in our eagerness to reach a tempting mouthful,
we get tangled in thorn bushes or slip down a rocky hillside.

If we're like sheep, we need protection,
and sometimes we need discipline.
We need guiding, directing and helping.
In the hands of a good shepherd,
a rod and a staff are our protection and guidance and help.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

We've been thinking like sheep.
Keen to reach the lush pastures.
But now we can be ourselves.
Thinking about our relationship with God.
What a sheep looks for is rich, green grass.
But if we relate to God like a sheep to a good shepherd, we can think about a banquet.
A table laden with all good things.

The things that frighten us, the things that threaten us, they're still there.
This table is prepared in the presence of our enemies.
But nevertheless, we can be at peace, at the table of our Lord.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows

Yes, even with our enemies encamped around us,
we're protected,
we're refreshed,
we have more than we need.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life

We have assurance, we can be confident,
of God's goodness, of God's steadfast love
that will take us through every situation – good or bad – that we may encounter in life.

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever

We can rely on God's goodness and love not just throughout this life,
but also beyond this life.
Here we have the prospect of eternity in God's presence.
Truly heaven.

This Psalm is full of confidence and encouragement for those who can relate to God
like sheep relate to a shepherd.
But how do we know God that way.

In John chapter 10 verse 14, Jesus describes himself like this

I am the good shepherd

Jesus is the good shepherd, who'll take us to the best pastures.
Even though it may mean taking us through difficult places.
Jesus is the good shepherd, who offers life-giving, fresh water.
Even though we may prefer a nasty, dirty puddle.
Jesus is the good shepherd, who helps us when we can't help ourselves.
Who restores us and refreshes us.
Jesus is the good shepherd,
in whose presence we find contentment.

And Jesus says

I know my sheep and my sheep know me

To truly know Jesus the good shepherd, and to know that Jesus truly knows us,
is both frightening and wonderful.
It's frightening, because we know Jesus knows us inside out.
Our thoughts. Our motivations. Our actions. Our everything.
It's frightening, because we know what pleases Jesus,
and we know we fall short.
But it's also wonderful, because we know Jesus loves us anyway.
Loves us so much, he'd do anything for us.

And what does Jesus do for us?
Jesus says

and I lay down my life for the sheep

How much does Jesus love us?

So much as to lay down his life for us.
That's how far he went,
to bring us into his flock,
to keep us safe.
He laid down his life for us.
And, of course, he rose again.
He came back to life.
Proving that with Him as our shepherd, we can have life – the best life.
Now and for eternity.
If we only follow him.

Follow Jesus.
Not seeking out things that are bad for us.
Not going the wrong way.
But allowing him to guide us along the right paths.
Even when life seems dark and difficult.
Follow Jesus.
Enjoy his provision.
Appreciate how he refreshes us.
Be confident in his love.
Follow Jesus.

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