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Sermon Text: Psalm 23

Find Peace in the Good Shepherd

Know that the LORD is God. We are His. We are his people, the sheep of His pasture. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

A soft breeze stirs the fresh springtime air. Crystal clear water bubbles and gurgles over rocks like a soothing lullaby. Nestled in lush soft grass, calm, cozy sheep, fed and satisfied, rest and doze, for they are safe and secure, whole and healthy. What a picture of peace Psalm 23 paints before our eyes! Peace, that God wants you and me to enjoy. Peace we find in the same place sheep find peace.

Ok, so what gives sheep such peace? Is it because they are strong and self-sufficient or that they face no dangers or troubles? Far from it! .

Deer have speed. Turtles have shells. Birds have wings. But sheep? They are a tottering lunch buffet for all kinds of wild animals—lions, wolves, bears, coyotes, oh my! Sheep have no power to defend themselves from such dangers all around.

Sound familiar? We live in world filled with uncertainty and dangers. And though we can take our precautions and throw up our defenses, we cannot escape them all. If we avoid the coronavirus and evade it by vaccination which is good, yet there is still an army of other diseases, accidents, disasters that can hunt us down like a wolf stalking sheep. Just as a lion can run down a sheep, so the ravages of time and old age will finally bring us to ground, (literally). And we have no more power to stop death than a lamb to stop a lion.

But sheep don't just face threats from the outside. Sheep are often a danger to themselves!

A book by a shepherd describes how a flock of sheep was being herded to a clean stream for water. But on the way, the sheep kept trying to stop to drink out of muddy puddles along the path, puddles polluted with manure and sickening parasites. The same shepherd tells of a sheep that tore up its skin on sharp thorns trying to get a single mouthful of grass in a thicket, while passing up safe green pasture all around it!

Foolish? Yes! But not so different from our sinful hearts that lead us astray from God's good and perfect commands to drink from the filthy mud puddles of sinful, self-serving ways. How easily we can get caught up chasing after what our sinful nature desires, regardless of whom it hurts or how it might damage our faith, running heedlessly after what God tells us will not bring us lasting satisfaction.

It is with good reason, that the Lord's prophet describes us with those familiar words: **We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way** (Isaiah 53).

Far from God's peace and care, we deserve His eternal judgment and to be left to be swallowed up by the wolf of death and swallowed down to eternal punishment. So where will we find true and lasting peace?

Just like with sheep in the field, the answer is not found in us, our strength or abilities. It is not found in the grass and water of their pasture, it is not found in the temporary things of this world. It is not found in the countless dangers on every hand. The answer is found only in the **Shepherd**.

This truth rings out loud and clear in Psalm 23. The Psalm starts out with the **LORD**. As the **Shepherd** who tends the sheep, *He* makes them safe and secure. Their fear dies away only because **He** is with them in **the valley of the shadow of death** and makes it so their **foes** cannot harm them.

Just glance over the words of Psalm 23 and you see it. It is constantly describing the things the Lord is doing for his sheep personally. The word **I** comes up four times in the psalm as a subject. The first time it is doing what we do naturally—walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The other three times the sheep is not actually doing anything, but simply enjoying the results of what the Shepherd has done for it. Everything depends on the Shepherd! Sheep find their **peace** in their shepherd! True peace is only found in the **Good Shepherd**.

The LORD is my shepherd. Our **Shepherd** is the greatest of all. He is the **LORD**, the one true God, the maker of heaven and earth.

In our Gospel lesson, we heard how Jesus Christ, eternal God the Son born of Mary takes this name for Himself when He says **I am the Good Shepherd** (John 10:11). Some of you may know from your catechism class days or from a Bible study or from reading Exodus 3, that the special name for God, the **LORD** (with all capital letters) is related to the Hebrew for, “**I AM.**” So when Jesus says “**I am the Good Shepherd**” He is alluding to this Psalm and saying that He is indeed the eternal **LORD** who is the **Good Shepherd!**

Now of course, sheep don’t choose the shepherd, the Shepherd chooses them. In the words of Psalm 100, we follow the **LORD** only because **He made us, and we are his... the sheep of His pasture.** We did not earn a place in God’s flock by anything we did or deserved.

This alone is why we are Jesus’ sheep: **surely goodness and mercy will pursue me.** It was **goodness and mercy** that led God to chase after our lost human race, make a promise to rescue and send His Son to save us. It was **goodness and mercy** that He chose you to be his, and **pursued** you personally to make you one of Jesus’ lambs at a baptismal font.

And so we say: **I lack nothing.** Only because the Lord gives us what we truly need. Indeed, He is the *One* we truly need. If we had nothing else except Jesus, our Good Shepherd, we would have all we truly need, for He gives us the forgiveness that restores peace and life with God. He gives us life from the dead and a place in His everlasting and eternal kingdom where no one and nothing will ever disturb the peace for all eternity!

He causes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. As our Good Shepherd, Christ provides us with food and drink and all we need to keep our body and life and all we have.

But most importantly of all, He gives us the true and lasting food and drink for our souls—the peace of His promise to guard and protect His people against every danger, the thirst quenching good news that He loves us and saves us. His Word and Sacraments not only feed our faith, but grants rest to our weary souls.

He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Righteousness is that holiness and perfection we need for life before God, but that in our imperfection we lack. The Hebrew word for **paths** here is the kind of path that is dug out and worn down because someone went there before you.

Jesus walked the perfect path of obedience ahead of us and in our place, He never strayed away from God’s good and perfect commandments, but gives us the credit for all he did. He has put us on to His perfect **Way**, His holy **paths**, that is He gives us as a gift the perfect record and righteousness we so desperately need, so that by Jesus’ perfect life, we are holy and right in the sight of God.

And with His forgiving love, **He restores our souls**, soothing our self-inflicted sinful wounds. With His holy death that paid for our guilt and shame, He makes us whole and healthy again with the good news of forgiveness. We have caused sin and pain to our own souls and to others, but Jesus, our **Shepherd** has **pursue(d)** us with His **goodness and mercy**, lifted us out of the tangled thorns, tended to our wounds and carried us home on His shoulders rejoicing.

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. Helpless and tasty as sheep are, they have nothing to fear when the shepherd is there by their side to protect them.

Jesus Christ is our **Good Shepherd** who laid down His life on the cross to save us from the greatest danger—the eternal death and hell our sins earned us. And then on the third day He proved those words in the Gospel: **I have the authority to take (my life) up again.** By bodily returning to life Jesus took His shepherd's staff and smashed it into the wolf's mouth of death, ripping out death's fangs, smashing death's teeth.

Now robbed of the ability to swallow us down to hell, death is forced to serve as the gateway to heaven for the believer. If virus, or accident, or the ravages of time claim our life, they cannot harm those who by God's grace are able to say: **for you (Lord) are with me.**

Yes we will all **walk through the valley of the shadow of death...** yes that includes a world full of dangers and troubles and grief on every side. But we do not face it on our own but with our ever living Shepherd Jesus to help and save us. And no matter how long or hard it may seem sometimes, remember it is just a **walk through**, soon your Shepherd will bring you **through** and out of that valley to life and joy unending in His heavenly palace:

You set a table for me in the presence of my foes. You drench my head with oil—not motor oil, but olive oil that was used to soothe skin dried out from the sun. But notice the Lord doesn't give you a couple of drops—but like a team dumping the Gatorade bucket over their coach—He richly pours it out—See how your God spares no expense in His great love for you, just like: **My cup is overflowing.**

This is a picture of the heavenly feast where life and joy is **rich, overflowing** and **unending.** It is the future of all who have been brought to trust in Jesus! And in the meanwhile, Jesus our Good Shepherd risen from the dead lives to watch, and feed, protect and guide us His sheep every day.

Sheep have peace when they have a shepherd. We have the Good Shepherd, who is not just the key to peace, but the source of perfect Peace. So don't look to yourself, to the passing things of this world or to anywhere else, but look to and lean on Jesus in His Word. **Find Peace** always and only **in the Good Shepherd** and what He has done for you. Amen.

Surely goodness and mercy will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD forever. Amen.

We confess our Christian faith in the perfect care of our Triune God, using the Nicene Creed on page 8 of the worship folder.