

Worship at Plains Presbyterian Church on July 31, 2022

John 10:7-18 (NIV)

[7] Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. [8] All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. [9] I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. [10] The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

[11] “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. [12] The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. [13] The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

[14] “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— [15] just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. [16] I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. [17] The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. [18] No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Psalm 23 (NIV)

A psalm of David.

*¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. **

*² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
³he restores my soul.*

*He guides me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.*

*⁴ Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

*⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

*⁶ Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,*

***and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.***

* This first line is the older King James and Revised Standard Version of this Psalm. The original NIV text is "I lack nothing." Both translations make it easy to miss the point that the Psalm teaches "I lack nothing *that I need.*"

LEADER: The Word of the Lord

PEOPLE: Thanks be to God

“Let’s Take a Hike” by Michael R. Burkley, July 31, 2022

It’s a beautiful day, so let’s go on a hike, at least in our imaginations. My wife and I were going on an early morning bird-watching hike this morning and then go to worship at the church we were attending before we came here. She’s still doing that, but I get to come here and imagine a hike with you, and I’m glad! When you go for a hike as opposed to a stroll, you prepare, you think about the things you need to bring, the places where you want to go. I probably go a bit overboard, but I tend to be in the “plan for the worst, but expect the best” category of packers. When I go for a long trip in the car I pack as much as I can in a suitcase, and pile a couple of boxes and bags in the backseat of my car, along with snacks for the trip. But when I go on a hike I try to plan with minimalism in mind. I do bring water and some food and I usually bring a life-straw so I can drink water from a stream if I need to without any unwelcome complications. But I always wear two pairs of socks and hiking boots when I have them. How do you plan for a hike?

Jesus tells us to “follow me,” and that means we are called to go on a hike with Jesus, because he doesn’t stay long in any one place. Jesus has plenty of places, situations, people, that he wants to speak the Kingdom of God into, and he calls us to follow him so that we can see the fields ripe around us and work for the harvest. How do we prepare to follow Jesus, to go on a life-long hike with him? I think Psalm 23, written by King David a thousand years before Jesus was born, can help us to find strength and hope for that journey with Jesus.

The Psalm is divided up into five balanced parts: On either end is a celebration of God’s presence, and then one step in from either end is a statement of God’s provision, and right in the middle is confidence in God’s protection. There’s a balance to it all. It begins and ends with our relationship with God, and that’s what life is all about.

Hebrew poetry often summarizes a story or a poem right at the start, and Psalm 23 is no exception: “The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want.” The LORD, Yahweh, using the personal, relational name of God, this God is my Shepherd. Shepherds care for their sheep, they feed them, they oftentimes live with them, protecting them, caring for them. The sheep learn to know the voice of their shepherd and to stay with them. In John 10:11 Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” If you want to know what kind of shepherd the LORD is, look to Jesus, because as Jesus said to Philip, his disciple, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” Jesus is the Good Shepherd and the image of the invisible God.

This Good Shepherd supplies our every need. We’re mostly familiar with the translation of this first verse as “I shall not be in want.” Now that’s a perfectly good translation as long as we remember not to misinterpret it. Remember, we’re going on a hike, and we might want the newest and best water-repellent and breathable fabrics for our clothes, the absolute best hiking boots and more, but we really don’t need them. Some people think that Psalm 23 guarantees that God will meet our every want, our every desire, and then they get disappointed when God doesn’t do that. But that’s not what this verse means. The word “want” here carries the older meaning of “lacking essential needs.” It’s not a promise that God will supply our every *desire*, but our every need, and that the Shepherd, God decides what the needs are.

But there’s something else that this first verse of Psalm 23 reminds us of. It reminds us that one of the most important things you can take with you on a hike is not a thing at all, but a friend, or even better, a guide. It’s safer and more fun! In some ways it’s more important to decide who you’re going to go on a hike with, even before you decide where to go. A sheep doesn’t need to decide where to go, if it trusts the Shepherd it follows the Shepherd. And we can go where God wants us to go because our shepherd God leads the way. God is the one who is with us, who has come to us, the one who cares for us, the one who will never leave us, who will never leave you. God is the LORD, not a God who is far away but one who is close, the one who guides us and provides for us, like a Shepherd caring for the sheep. This Psalm is David’s declaration of trust in God, trust that we all can share in. Right from the start this Psalm says that our relationship with God, our safety in the midst of a wild world so often out to get us, depends on our trust in the Shepherd, in staying close to the Shepherd, for just as sheep can only thrive under the care of the Shepherd, we will only thrive when we call the LORD our Shepherd. A lot to explore in just one verse!

Once you decide who you’re going hiking with, you need to ask, “Where should we go?” You don’t usually plan on going to the local sewage treatment center or a toxic waste dump. If you’re going to go on a hike, you usually try to go someplace beautiful and inspiring and generally safe, to look at the birds, to enjoy the view. Since the Shepherd is God, the Shepherd gets to decide where to go. We get to decide to follow, or not. It seems to me that’s a good thing to remember, that we are not the shepherd of our souls; Jesus is. If verse one is about celebrating the presence of God in our lives, verses 2 and 3 remind us of God’s provision for our lives. In verse 2 David compares himself to a sheep led

by a shepherd to a beautiful and safe place, to green pastures and quiet waters. It's my understanding that a sheep generally lays down only under two circumstances—when they are totally content and feeling safe or when they are so frightened that have completely worn themselves out by running away in anxiety and terror and lostness. Mostly, they just like to amble along and eat, and they can do that where the Shepherd guides them.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,” The Shepherd brings the sheep to a safe place where they can rest and eat and drink. There's a little bit of self-deprecating humor here when David says that the Shepherd leads him “beside quiet waters.” Again, I've been told that sheep will often wade right into the water to get a drink. If the water is still, the lanolin in the wool keeps the sheep dry so that they can wade in and out and with a shake or two be comfortably dry. But if the waters are fast moving they can force their way into the wool, and the sheep can double its weight from the water and can't climb out of the stream by itself. Sheep are pretty dumb; David knew that, and yet he still compared himself to a sheep. But he knows that his shepherd is the LORD, so he also knows that his shepherd can provide for him.

In verse three David brings his imaginations down to the real world and so should we. He says that the LORD guides him in paths of righteousness, for his name's sake—for the cause of the LORD. Here's where a person is different from a sheep. A shepherd can lead a sheep down a safe path, but only people can walk the paths of righteousness. Like a sheep, the only way we can walk where we're supposed to walk is when the LORD guides us, when God shows the way of that path. We can be guided by any number of guides in this world, but remember what can happen when you go on a hike. When we walk out in the wilderness we had better keep our eyes on the path and on those little way markers nailed to the trees, because if we don't, we probably will get lost soon enough, and possibly panicked and running and when we lay down it will be in a fearful exhaustion.

The Psalm begins with God's faithful presence with us as the Shepherd of our lives. If these words inspire us and guide us, we too, like David will trust that God will provide for our every true need, whether we like it or not—no sheep likes a sheep dip. A sheep feels that way about the Shepherd. Using our imagination and this Psalm as a guide, we can see that is how God cares for us. God comes to us, awakens faith and trust in us, and shows faithful care for us all. God does that for us. Do you think we who are made in God's image should do the same for others?

The Prophet Micah reminds us of what the Lord requires of us: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. Jesus gives us a short summary saying that we are called to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Most of the time we think that loving our neighbors “as we love ourselves” means that we should work at loving our neighbors just as much as we love ourselves. That's true, but there's also a second way to look at that. Just as the word “as” can mean, “in the same way” it can also mean, “as you go about,” as in “love your neighbors *as your go about* loving yourselves. I think it means both. A lot of us can be let off very easily if we think we only have to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, because we don't love ourselves all that much. But if we're to love our neighbors as we go about loving ourselves, we have a double, and better task. We are called to love others *and* to love ourselves, to grow in love for others *and* grow in love for ourselves. We need that balance for we can easily fall off the path of righteousness for his name's sake by loving others too much, destroying ourselves, or loving others too little and forgetting that we too are God's sheep.

A contented sheep is almost always a part of a flock. Shepherds doesn't usually lead just one sheep. In all the sheep there are some sheep that are more tuned in to the will of the shepherd than others, who love listening to the voice of the shepherd. And those sheep, just a little bit, not much but some, those sheep who love the shepherd help the rest to stay close to the shepherd by following the shepherd themselves. It's like the other sheep say, “Well, they know where they're going, so I guess I'll follow them.” After a while the rest of the sheep catch on to the fact that's it's the shepherd they should really be following.

When we love and follow the Lord, we are really learning to love ourselves, opening ourselves up to the green pastures and quiet waters that the Lord provides to those who love him. When we are loving ourselves that way, and loving our neighbors, too, they will take notice and will like being around us. Maybe if we keep doing it long enough they'll begin to see that it's not us that's special and worth following, but it's the Good Shepherd that's all of that and more. Let's go on a hike with the Lord together!

But what happens when the green pastures turn into deep and dark valleys? I guess that's for next week.