

“THE SHEPHERD AND THE SHEEP”
A Sermon Preached at
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(transcribed from audio file)

The 23rd Psalm is a wonderful, wonderful psalm to remind you that you are always protected by our Lord and Savior.

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the
still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for
his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will
fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort
me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. NRSV*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Have you ever sat down to watch something – an episode of a show with a brand-new bag of chips, a full-size bag of chips? You had a handful. Crunch, Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Another handful. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. And then all of a sudden, it's been three hours, four episodes, five plot twists and an entire bag of chips later and you wonder, how did I get here? The rest of the house is asleep and it's past midnight and it seems like you just sat down to watch one episode and eat a few handfuls of chips.

Or maybe you have snuggled up to your dog or cat on the couch just to take a few minutes on a Saturday morning to relax and you started scrolling on your phone. Swipe. Swipe. Swipe. And then you got curious about a video or an article you read, and you went down a rabbit trail on the internet. Click. Swipe. Swipe. And then all of a sudden it's been two and a half hours. Fifty posts later and your Saturday

morning is gone, and you wonder, how did I get here? Part of your day off is gone and you have nothing to show for it, and you don't even feel relaxed. And it seems like just minutes ago you sat down to relax for just a few minutes.

Or perhaps you have gotten married to the love of your life with the best intentions and said loving vows and then distraction, distraction, distraction. Then all of a sudden its been two kids, three houses and sixteen years later and you wonder, how did I get here? Your spouse and you are in a routine of constant bickering, resentment and frustration, but it feels like it was just yesterday that you married the love of your life and now you wonder to yourself, how did I get here?

Psalm 23 begins with those famous five words. Do you remember those five words? Let's say them together. The Lord is my shepherd. Indeed, the Lord is my shepherd. Well, if the Lord is my shepherd, the scholar Rev. Dr. James Howell says, "Then I am a sheep, and the reason sheep need a shepherd is simple. Sheep nibble themselves lost."

Sheep nibble themselves lost. You know that sheep eat grass and flowery green weeds, right? They nibble along. They find a patch of green grass and they nibble along. Then they see some weeds over there and they nibble, nibble. Nibble along. And all of a sudden, they may even ask themselves, if they do such a thing, how did I get here? Just like sheep, we can nibble, nibble, nibble, and then what feels like all of a sudden, we don't know where we are and we end up asking ourselves, how did I get here?

We can end up wondering, how did I get in this dark valley. I can remember times of rest in green pastures like the psalmist says, or walking beside still waters, so how did I end up in this dark valley? How did I end up here wasting hours of my time disconnected from the people in my life? How did I end up here in a struggling and broken marriage? How did I end up here addicted to my phone and struggling with my mental health? Some of you may even be asking yourself, how did I end up here, sitting in a church, lost and disconnected, feeling far away from God?

The answer, we nibble ourselves lost. A little here. A little there. Not noticing the bigger picture. Not paying attention to what's going on around us, we nibble ourselves lost. This happens in our day-to-day lives, with our mental health, with our relationships, jobs and just the daily rhythms of our week, but it also happens in our spiritual life.

We prioritize staying up late, having a beer, or four, while watching TV and we stop praying before bed. We prioritize sleeping in and having a lazy Sunday morning and we stop going to church. We prioritize the distractions of this world and stop connecting with God. It all adds up to elite overtime and then six months, a year, two years, fifteen years go by, and we wonder, how did I end up here?

The metaphor of us being sheep isn't the most encouraging or flattering, really, but hearing that we have a shepherd is encouraging. And we do. We have a good shepherd. A shepherd who journeys alongside us, redirecting and protecting. A shepherd whose goodness and mercy follow us even when we nibble ourselves lost. A shepherd who is with us on this journey of life and faith.

When we read Psalm 23, we sometimes overlook the fact that it is about a journey, describing a journey. A journey where there is time for rest in green pastures, where there is walking beside still waters, and there is time in a dark valley.

Psalm 23 reminds us that our life and faith is a journey. One that has God with us from the beginning to the end. One where God's goodness and mercy pursue us. That word is sometimes translated as follow, but it can also be translated as pursue. God's goodness and mercy pursue us all the days of our lives, each step of the way.

So, if or when you find yourself asking, how did I get here? Feeling distant from your life of faith or feeling far from God, remember that the Lord is your shepherd who has been with you the whole time and goodness and mercy have pursued you wherever you nibbled off to.

The Lord is with you ready to guide you back if you would just stop nibbling for a while and let God lead you on the right path.

You know, one of the things that I think sheep could do to prevent themselves from getting lost? If they could just look around periodically, they could just pay attention to their surroundings; create habits where they check in with their flock and with their shepherd. Where they enjoy the grass, but they look up and they are aware of where they were and where they may be going.

For us as humans this is the same. It looks like pausing, which is really hard to do sometimes. It looks like taking time and putting those distractions down, reflecting on our journey of faith, checking in with God regularly and paying attention, paying attention to the trajectory that we are going on, and paying attention to where we might end up if we keep going that way.

Today is Confirmation Sunday, a day where we generally celebrate younger folks confirming their faith and claiming it as their own, but we also know that we have to claim our faith every single day, where we have to build habit, take pauses for reflection and pay attention.

Claiming our faith is not a one-day event, but a lifelong journey with God. One that doesn't always promise daisies and rainbows and it will most likely include dark valleys. There may be times where we may wonder, how did I get here? How did I get here?

But the good news is that when we nibble ourselves lost, God is still with us ready to guild us back, because we are like sheep, but that means that the Lord is our shepherd.

Amen? Amen.