

Pray, Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus, who is the great shepherd of the sheep. And through the blood of his everlasting covenant has made us perfect to do every good work working in his will. And we ask that you would teach us through the study of your son and the shepherd role that he plays in our lives how to follow him. May the preaching and ministry of your word be your word for the sake and glory of your son, Jesus, in his name we pray, amen.

Today is the fourth Sunday after Easter, and the church has traditionally over a long, long period, almost 2,000 years, celebrated Good Shepherd Sunday on this particular Sunday. And so we read Psalm 23, which is a very beloved Psalm that many of you may even have memorized by heart. It's often read at funerals as just a beautiful expression of faith and love for the Lord, personal relationship. But it's a Sunday that is celebrated for a particular reason. And it goes back to early Christianity.

When the early church was making new disciples and they would bring people into the life of faith and into the life of the Lord, they would need to have a period of instruction or teaching, and this was called catechesis. And so it would all culminate with the season of Lent, where people would have special disciplines of repenting for things and turning away from their sins and seeking after the Lord. And so during that season of Lent, one of the key verses that they would have to memorize as new potential converts to the faith was Psalm 23. And then after their baptism on Easter day, there would be another set of classes or teachings that Christians would go through. And this was for the brand new Christians. And this was called mistigaji, which was teaching people basically about how to walk after you have been given your life to Jesus. How do you walk in His ways and follow Him? And they would use that psalm that they had had memorized in the beginning of their conversion to become a basis of the teaching of the faith. And so Psalm 23 has been a beloved psalm, especially around the idea of conversion and baptism. And in fact, one of the things when you go and you look and study old Christian art, one of the things that you will see more than anything else are actually images of Jesus as the good shepherd. You don't see Him as Jesus on the cross. That actually comes much later in Christian art. But there are more of these imagery of Jesus as the good shepherd, carrying the lamb on His back. I also think it's interesting that we're doing this on Mother's Day, because as I think about mothers, I actually can't think of anybody in our lives who shepherds our hearts and our souls better than mothers do.

That's one of the big tasks of moms is to shepherd their children's hearts. And a testimony of that is actually Mother's Day itself. I love Mother's Day for church attendance actually, because I know that some moms will say, you know, one of the greatest gifts that you can give me for Mother's Day is for all my children and my husband to just come to church with me. And so oftentimes Mother's Day is just one of those high Sundays. I have noticed that Father's Day doesn't quite work the same way.

I kind of think, you know, the fathers might go, you know, what I really want on Father's Day is to go play golf or something like that. But, yeah, and that actually says a lot, doesn't it, about the care that mothers have for caring for the spiritual life of their children?

And this is the goal of Psalm 23 is that we would come to a place where we have a personal relationship with the Lord, that He is our provision, He's our protection, He's our guidance, He's our direction in life.

And I want you to go back to the... in your brain and in your imagination to when Psalm 23 was probably written was during the time when a young David was a shepherd boy. He was a singer-songwriter. I don't know if you know that about King David, but he did a lot of playing an instrument called a lyre, and he was very gifted musically, and he did a ton of writing of songs. And you can find most of David's songs are in the Bible in what we call the book of Psalms, and we just heard Psalm 23 is one of the beloved songs.

Like a lot of singer-songwriters, songs really come out of experience and the angst of life and the challenges of life, the difficulties of life, and that's true of David. Many of his Psalms are really filled with emotion and passion and desire, and you see something of the heart of the writer in reading the lyrics of their works. And that is very much true of David, who was described by the Scriptures as a man after God's own heart. And that doesn't mean he was a perfect guy. He did a lot of things wrong, a whole lot of things wrong. But he was somebody that walked with the Lord. He had a personal relationship with the Lord. So just picture David's ministry as a shepherd, actually. He wasn't always a king. He started off as a shepherd. He was a young boy, and you read about this in the book of Kings, where David is out tending the fields as a very young boy.

And what a lot of responsibility for a young little guy to be out there with a huge herd of sheep, caring for his parents' investment, actually.

And tending sheep was actually a dangerous job for a young kid, because there were robbers that would come and try to steal the sheep. There were wild animals like bears and lions.

It was an arid land, and so you were constantly having to find new pastures and sort of lead these sheep along to find the places to nurture them and feed them. And then you also had sheep, which were kind of stubborn animals and not always the smartest animals, and they get

themselves into trouble. And so think about all that was involved for a young kid, really, trying to take care of all this.

And what came to David as he is trying to be this grown-up kid, and I think all young boys want to be warriors and tough and strong. They kind of look up to the big guys. But here's David, and he is really getting in touch with his anxiety in Psalm 23, where he's probably thinking about the robbers and the dangers and the various things, and that I have to care for these sheep.

But then he begins to realize, "Well, who's caring for me? I'm out here all alone having to do this work, and I'm actually a sheep." And so he begins, "The Lord is my shepherd. Therefore, I shall not want." And he begins from there to just put himself as a shepherd into the role of being a sheep that trusts a shepherd. What an interesting twist on writing a song, huh? I am the sheep, and I need the Lord to be my shepherd because I'm anxious.

And he goes from there, and he starts to reflect on what the shepherding role of the Lord is on his life. He says, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures, and he leads me beside quiet waters."

One of the, I mentioned mothers, but one of the things that parents are such a wonderful provision for their children is actually we care about the well-being of our kids.

And our children instinctively and intuitively know that, even though they turn their nose up at eating vegetables and things like that. We are leading them to good things and trying to shepherd their hearts and their desires and their lives to places that actually won't fill them with anxiety and have them running off the rails, but actually bring them to places of calm and peace. And that's what the Lord says, the Lord does for David. He says, "The Lord leads me beside still waters.

He takes me to those places of profound rest where all the world around me is filled with anxiety and the lack of peace."

I tell you, we live in a day, don't we, where the world is filled with anxiety. And I don't think we're supposed to live life with a 24-hours news cycle.

For thousands and thousands of years, human beings have not had CNN and Fox TV, where we can know what is going on in Ukraine and Russia from Florida, or what's happening in the Middle East, or what's happening over in Africa, or in China.

There is no way that one person can bear all the anxieties of the world upon themselves, and yet we are flooding our homes, our most sacred and what are supposed to be peaceful places with the anxieties and worries of the world.

We have them on our electronic devices, and we wake up in the morning, and the very first thing that we're hit with is news of what's happening everywhere and how this group is fighting with this group.

And then we go through the day and we get bombarded with it, and then we finish our day with anxiety, and then we go to bed and we wonder why we can't sleep, right?

Because we're not sinking up as we should, and maybe I'll say it in positive, if we will just sink up as we should with the Lord as our shepherd, and allow Him to be the one to lead us to the green pastures and the still waters.

His aim, like a good parent, is to revive our souls. He goes on to say, "He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." One of the things that the early church would teach, and you can read about this in a serial of Jerusalem's mystical lectures. It's a gripping reading. If you want to give up the news in the evening and read something, it'll put you right to sleep. Just read Serial of Jerusalem. But one of the things that Serial talks about is with Psalm 23, is one way to think about it is it's actually all about what we're doing when we come into a worship service. That what the Lord is doing as we come in and we are walking and following our good shepherd into a place like this. We're being taught by His Word. So He's feeding our souls. He's nurturing us. He's giving us the still waters and the green pastures to feed on. And He's also, through His Word and His commandments, telling us about the right pathways so that we know what the way of the Lord is. We know how to live our lives and to walk in His ways.

And His ways are the best ways for our life. We will simply stay on the right pathways. We literally can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil.

Because His pathways are time-tested and true.

And so when we study His Word and we hear it preached and we hear it read and we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it in our daily devotional times with the Lord, the Word is guiding us and leading us down these right pathways. And as a brand new Christian, it's really important actually to know that one of the most important feelings that we are to get as new believers is the Word. We need the Bible in our system.

It's actually more than that. It's Mother's Day, so we talk about shepherding a child's heart. They've done some amazing studies recently about adolescents and watching children grow up from young ages and to teenager to young adulthood. And one of the studies really drilled in on what are the practices that need to take place in order for young people to learn the faith and for that faith to stick all the way through high school and into young adulthood. And there are actually four things. It's very simple actually, but there are four things that have been shown in a lot of the studies that have been done that will keep a young person in the faith at a person... I mean from the ones that they were studying was like at an 85% level.

And these are the four things. Write them down, parents.

That's having parents who were deeply committed to their faith and practiced it on a regular basis. In other words, you can't give somebody something that you personally don't have, but if you're modeling it and you're living it and you're showing it in your life, that is the number one thing in order to raise and shepherd a child's heart. The second one is a recognition that the faith is so critically important for day-to-day life.

That's not just a one and done or something we do just on Sunday, but every single day, every single minute, every single hour, we need to be having the Lord be our shepherd as we walk through life following Him.

And then the last two things was a frequent personal prayer and then the third, frequent reading of Scripture.

It really is that simple to raise a child in the faith. The Scriptures promise, you know, if you train a child in the way they should go when they are older, they will not depart. 85% is what the stats are bearing out on that little proverb from the Bible. And if we don't have these things, the percentages drop way, way down.

And that said, "The Lord is my shepherd, so therefore I will fear no evil, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." And He says, "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." These are the tools of the shepherd. The rod is what beats off the wild animals and fights off the lions and the bears. It also can be used as a disciplinary tool for unruly sheep.

And I don't know if you've ever had the Lord walk you upside the head with the rod before, but I've been corrected by the Lord. And as one passage says, "No discipline from the Lord feels pleasant at the time, but then later produces a harvest of righteousness." We don't like to be disciplined by the rod, but the rod actually is for our provision and for our comfort. And then the other tool is the staff, which is that shepherd's crook. And that is used to actually get sheep out of the pits and holes that they're falling in.

Oh, no. Okay, good.

That has happened before, but these instruments of the Lord are given there as a way of comforting us and protecting us and providing for us, and leading us.

Then the... And I'll end with this, but the shepherd imagery in Psalm 23 shifts gears to become more realistic actually.

He's always been talking about the Lord as a shepherd, recognizing that the Lord is my king. The Lord is the one who is leading me and guiding me and directing me and providing for me like any good king ought to do.

But then he gets explicit about that, and he says, "You have prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You have anointed my head with oil and my cup overflows."

He's talking about the king's keep in a castle. This is not a soldier's hasty rations. This is the king's abundant provision of a banquet to lavish upon his subjects. And while outside the keep are a bunch of enemies who are threatening the people of God, inside the keep is abundance and life, and gracious provision by the Lord.

John 10, which Billy read earlier, the bad leaders of the time, what he called "hired hands" and "thieves" only come to steal, kill, and destroy from the people of God. And so when they come to him, they say, "Tell us plainly if you're the Messiah."

And he says, "Oy vey, I have told you. Told you over and over again."

In fact, just back up a little bit before that verse, he told them, "I am the good shepherd.

There are hired hands and thieves and robbers, which is more like what you are, but I am the good shepherd. I am the one who will," and this is what he says, "lay down my life for my sheep."

And one of the reasons why we can trust in the gracious provision of the Lord is because he has demonstrated by his sacrificial love manifest on the cross that he loves us and that he literally would do anything to save and care for our souls, even death on a cross.

And so when we say and we pray to the Lord, "You are my shepherd," what we are renouncing is all the other poser kings and leaders and maybe even human leaders and rulers in our life that are there for good, agents of God. But ultimately, all human shepherds will fall short, whether we're talking about our parents or clergy, or governmental leaders, or whoever it is.

What we desperately need, and the only hope actually for the care of our souls, is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

There's a beautiful verse at the end of or in the middle of the book of Revelation at the end of the Bible that describes this great throng, a multitude that have finished their race on earth and they're there praising the Lamb of God, is what it says, who takes away the sin of the world.

Agnes Day.

And there's this line, it says, "For the Lamb in the center of their worship, the center of the throne, will be their shepherd."

He is both the one who laid down his life for us and for that reason, he is the one who alone has the true authority and vitality to lead and shepherd our souls.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we ask You to lead us in our ways. Yes, this is a world that is filled with death, destruction. We're mindful of the thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy, but You have promised as the good shepherd to give us life, to give us abundant life. And so we pray that You would help our hearts to be so inclined to You that we would pray with that little boy out in the shepherd's field, "The Lord is my shepherd. Therefore, I shall not want." We want to follow You all the days of our lives because we know that Your goodness and mercy follows us and pursues us all the days of our lives. Amen.