

In the Presence of Enemies©

John 10:22-30; Psalm 23

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We are all familiar with the 23rd Psalm, aren't we? Many of us could recite it from memory. The Lord is my shepherd. Jesus is our good shepherd. Our liturgical calendar that lists all the different, special times we observe in the church, lists today as Good Shepherd Sunday. It is the 4th Sunday in the Easter Season.

But are you aware that the Bible refers to Jesus as three different types of shepherd? Hebrews 13 tells about Jesus as the Great Shepherd who comes to protect his sheep; and 1 Peter 4 gives us a picture of Jesus as the Chief Shepherd, who will come again to bring his sheep home and who will crown them with glory and honor.

Today is the first of a three-part sermon series on Jesus as the Shepherd. We hear Jesus, in John 10, call himself a shepherd whose sheep know his voice and follow; a shepherd who protects his sheep and keeps them safe. He is the Good Shepherd.

And of course, there is the beloved 23rd Psalm. While it was written by David years before Jesus was ever born, it very much points to Jesus as the good shepherd.

David was a shepherd boy himself, and the least likely of his brothers to be chosen by God to become King of Judah. Wouldn't it be great to see David's face today, if he could realize all these years later how this little statement of faith in a protecting, compassionate, providing God, has been so well known and such a comfort in times of trouble?

This is the Psalm that is so often requested for funeral services. It is one I include when reading Scripture to a person who is dying. So often, even when that person has been unable to talk to me, as soon as I begin reading, I see their lips moving as they repeat the familiar words along with me.

Each statement of this Psalm gives reassurance and is an affirmation of trust in a Shepherd who is completely reliable; who knows our every need and every fear.

In Bible Study last Wednesday, we talked about the statement *I shall not want*. We were all in agreement that this doesn't mean we will not want for anything. Just like a child who wants things that are not necessary and perhaps are even dangerous for us, the Shepherd provides our human needs – love, compassion, care, food, water.

The Good shepherd knows what each of us needs and is there, ready to provide. That is why he makes us lie down in green pastures. Someone said they didn't like the words that say he *makes* us lie down. We humans don't really like to be made to do something. We tend to be an independent bunch.

But if you think about it, sometimes as parents, we have to make our children lie down to rest. Small children will fight sleep like a warrior, throwing tantrums with no clue as to why they are acting that way. But parents know they are tired and they need to rest.

Those children would not typically lie down if they weren't made to, but they are often sound asleep before you can count to ten.

Shepherd probably have to do that with sheep as well. And we are much like the sheep – or the children sometimes. We don't know what is good for us, but Jesus does. Green pastures mean calm, peaceful rest and good food to eat.

And he leads us beside still waters. Sheep are startled easily. Running water would surely frighten them and they would run away, rather than have their thirst quenched.

I love the last words of the Psalm: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I once saw a figurine at the Precious Moments museum and store in Carthage, Missouri, that had a shepherd with 3 sheep right behind him. The sheep names were: Shirley and Goodness and Mercy. And the little sign said: "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Now that's good news!

Where do you go for good news? ABC? FOX? CNN?

You might go to one or more of those stations for news, but I'll bet you don't go to any one of them expecting to find much in the way of good news!

Some people tell me they just don't even listen to the news. I suppose the saying might be true – "no news is good news."

But, no news at all seems like maybe living in an unreal world with a false sense of security.

Yet, if we watch too much for too long, the visual reality of what is wrong with the world begins to overwhelm us and we come to think there is no good news. We can even be persuaded that there is more evil in the world than good.

Just this past week, we remembered with all those in Oklahoma City, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building that took place on April 19, 1995.

And on the day of September 11th, 2001, millions of people all over the world had their eyes glued to the television. That was definitely not a good news day. And it certainly put us on edge! It made us suspicious of anyone who looked different. For some of us, it was the first time we realized just how vulnerable we are. It seemed we were surrounded by enemies.

And today, we might think those enemies have multiplied, as we listen and watch the news. But, while there is evidence that we do have enemies and that evil is in our midst, I think there is much good to rejoice and give thanks for.

Our Scripture lessons today – both the gospel reading from John, and the 23rd Psalm – come with good news for anyone who has fear of enemies.

The Shepherd image was one that was easy for Biblical people to understand – more so than for us today. Most of us haven't had much experience with leading flocks of sheep.

Growing up, I had plenty of experience helping with herding cattle – surrounding them and prodding them to go in the direction we wanted. I never saw a cow that would just follow anyone, unless it was the truck full of alfalfa on a winter's day.

But sheep are different. They hear the voice of the shepherd that watches over their flock. They know that shepherd, they trust him, and they follow him wherever he leads.

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, who is a Bible Scholar who lived in the Middle East for many years, tells about how at night all the sheep, of several different flocks, were often herded into one area that was surrounded by a wall. The sheep would come in and go out through the sheep gate, as would the numerous shepherds.

In the morning, when it was time to separate the sheep so they could go out for grazing, the sheep looked much the same, yet each shepherd knew all the little details about each one of their own sheep. That one has a twitch in it's eye; this one has a small mark on it's hoof; another one is more fearful than the others.

But the sheep also know which voice is the familiar sound of their shepherd. Perhaps it is the way he raises his voice, or the particular call, or the whistle that is just theirs to hear and know.

It brings us back to the good news we hear in John. The Jewish leaders were frustrated with Jesus and wanted him to just come out with it --- “are you the Messiah, the one we've been waiting for? Or are you not?”

Jesus answers – *I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.*

The psalmist writes – *You prepare a table in the presence of my enemies.*

The shepherd leads the sheep to beautiful, peaceful, pastoral places with quiet waters, lush green pastures, a place for grazing and lying down to rest. There may be wolves and other wild animals who are on the outskirts watching, waiting for an opportunity to pounce, but the shepherd watches and protects his flock.

In fact, the shepherd will go to any lengths to keep his sheep safe, even risking his own life. The shepherd is dead serious about his job and the sheep trust him to take them through the dark, scary paths.

In his book, *Safe in the Shepherds Arms*,¹ Max Lucado talks about that statement: *You anoint my head with oil*. He tells about how flies and bugs can be so irritating to sheep that they can actually kill themselves trying to get relief. If flies go up in the nose of the sheep and lay eggs, it can be deadly. Sometimes the sheep will bang their heads on rocks, trying to get rid of the bugs, until they are bleeding and have deep wounds.

At night, the shepherd will gather his flock into the pen and will go to each sheep individually, calling them by name and he will go through their fleece looking for wounds and bites. He will rub oil on those sores to soothe the sheep and to help them heal. He also will use the oil as a repellent to keep the bugs off the sheep.

Today, we often use anointing oil as a symbol of our Good Shepherd anointing us for healing and for protection and for blessings. We anoint when we pray over a sick person or to give a blessing. It is a symbol of the Holy Spirit being with us.

As Christians, it is easy to see Christ in this image of the shepherd. Jesus calls himself the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus literally did lay down his life for his sheep – and we are the sheep of his pasture.

A Good Shepherd will go to all lengths to provide shelter, food, water, protection, comfort and care for his flock. We are still in the Easter Season as we remember the life of caring and love, of healing that Jesus gave to his people.

Most of all we remember that Jesus gave his life on the cross so that the enemy – death – would not be able to hurt us. Jesus conquered death and sin and provided a pathway to eternal life where he leads all of his flock.

The psalmist writes, *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me ...*

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who we can completely rely on and trust. We need not be afraid of anything – not of storms in our lives, not of enemies and hatred, not of death itself.

Jesus says no one can snatch those who belong to me away from me. No one! As the Apostle Paul says *Nothing can separate me from the love of God*. (Romans 8). Nothing. Not even death!

In Jesus Christ, we have a good shepherd – we have everything, and even more that we need, in him. He gave his life for us so we might be saved – given new life.

¹ Max Lucado, *Safe in the Shepherds Arms*, Hope & Encouragement from Psalm 23, Thomas Nelson Publishing, Nashville, TN, ©2002, 2009, p. 78, 79.

He gives us living waters to drink until we are thirsty no more. He feeds us on the bread of life. At the Lord's Supper, which he provided for us, we are fed with food to live on, soul food, food that strengthens our very core.

Jesus the great healer, the protector, the provider, the comforter, the leader, is the one we want and need as shepherd of our entire life – body, mind and spirit.

Jesus said, my sheep hear my voice, and they follow. Listen for the shepherd's voice. He will lead you safely home. Amen.

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