

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“A SUMMER PSALM: THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD”

1. Shepherding Our Wants (Psalm 23:1)

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*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,
He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
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.
You prepare a table before me
In the presence of my enemies
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup overflows
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Psalm 23 is certainly one of the classic passages in the Bible, a beautiful song of confidence and comfort.

And so, we're going to slow down and take the time to drink in the good news of Psalm 23. For the next several Sundays, Becky, Kyle and I are going to walk through Psalm 23 verse by verse so that, by the time we're finished, we'll know the message of Psalm 23 by heart.

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We live in a consumer culture. And the clearest sign that we live in a consumer culture is all the TV commercials.

Right now, I've been bingeing on the latest Geico campaign: "Bundling Made Easy". It starts with the same set-up: a couple testifies, "We love our new home" and they list all the nice features – original crown molding, walk-in closets, natural light, hardwood floors, great neighborhood. And then they add their "buts":

- "But the Homeowners Association has been very involved" they say as Cynthia, the Nazi HOA president, chainsaws down their mailbox since it's 2" over regulation.

- “There is a bit of a clogging problem” they say as the apartment upstairs is populated by a large family of Amish clog dancers).
- “We have a Ratt problem” they say since the 80’s metal band Ratt has taken up residence in the house.

Geico wants me to bundle my home and auto insurance together so that I can save money. Actually, so that *Geico* can make money.

As a rule, TV commercials have a very direct formula, delivering a message that is crystal clear: “Here is something you should want”:

- whether it’s the fact that I’m carrying too little insurance or too many pounds;
- whether I’m losing my hair or losing market-share to my competitors;
- whether I have boring clothes or drive a boring car

the message is always the same: “Take a look at this product. Isn’t this something you want?” And, as it turns out, “Yes!” – we want it very much.

You see, TV commercials provide the plotline for life in a consumer culture. We buy things because we want. And we want lots of things. And we want them a lot. And then we read Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” It’s the plotline to a completely different story.

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The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. These words have a great appeal, a great resonance. They are comforting words, assuring words, words we believe and words we want to believe. But when we think about these words, their simple assurance becomes a bit more complex. And this is for two reasons.

First, many of us – especially those of us who grew up in the suburbs – we don’t really know much about shepherds or sheep. What is the whole shepherd/sheep metaphor about? “The Lord is my shepherd” – it sounds good, but what, exactly, is the point of comparison? Our uncertainty is illustrated by the fact that no one has ever been able to come up with a way to modernize this verse, to make it sound contemporary:

The Lord is my supervisor (?)

The Lord is my co-pilot (?)

The Lord is my life-coach (?)

Nothing works.

Second: while we’re not exactly sure how God is like a shepherd, it’s clear that, in the metaphor, if the Lord is our shepherd then we are the sheep. And we have trouble with the whole sheep business.

- Because we know that sheep are basically defenseless, and that doesn’t fit well with our self-reliant American self-image.

- We also know that sheep need the constant supervision of the shepherd – and we don’t like to think of ourselves as needing to be managed, that we might be “high maintenance.”
- And most of all, we know that sheep are spectacularly dumb. You can teach a dog to sit, you can train a horse to count, you can teach a bear to dance, but no one’s ever seen a trained sheep. And that doesn’t fit well with our self-image, either.

So, let’s take a closer look at this well-loved verse, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

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First, Psalm 23:1 makes a negative assertion: “I shall not want.”

Living as we do in an over-commercialized world, where we’re told that we lack so much and there is so much out there to want, it’s odd to hear “I shall not want.”¹ It’s hard for us to relate to, because our lives are full of wants:

- We want a bigger house.
- We want a newer car.
- We want the latest electronics.
- And we want our kids to have all of these things and more.

And we want other things, too, things we can’t buy.

- We want happy marriages.
- We want good health.
- We want a successful career.
- We want to be free of worry about the future.

But it’s very hard, when we’re so full of wants, for us to be contented people. And we know that we’re not contented people because, if we really sat down and thought about it, it would be very hard for us to define what it would look like to have enough – a big-enough paycheck, successful-enough children, a funded-enough retirement account. There is a yawning gap of “want” in our lives.

But the psalmist says, “I shall not want.” The psalmist doesn’t have this persistent sense of lack, this drive for something bigger and better, this constant wanting. Because the psalmist has God, and that’s enough. The psalmist knows that the Lord is his shepherd, and that has taken care of his wants.

How can that possibly be enough?

¹ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), p. 146.

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Well, the answer is found in the positive assertion of verse 1: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

The Bible is full of passages where God is compared to a shepherd:

Psalm 100:

Know that the Lord is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;

We are his people, the sheep of his pasture (100:3)

Isaiah 40:

[The Lord] tends his flock like a shepherd:

He gathers the lambs in his arms

And carries them close to his heart (40:11)

Ezekiel 34:

The Lord says: ... As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. ... I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. (34:12,14)

But here’s an important piece of Bible-interpreting advice: it’s always an iffy proposition, when we think about God, to start with some general concept – “What is a shepherd like?” – and then apply it to God: “*This is what a shepherd is like, so that’s what God is like.*”

No. It’s always a better approach to observe *precisely how* God has acted like a shepherd. And that means we need to turn to a passage from the New Testament – Jesus’ Parable of the Lost Sheep:

"If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.'" (Luke 15:4-6)

Like many of Jesus’ parables, this parable makes its point by surprising us: a shepherd, in charge of an entire flock of sheep, abandons 99 of them, leaving them defenseless and forced to fend for themselves in the wilderness, while he conducts an all-out search & rescue operation for one sheep that’s missing. This is strange behavior in a shepherd. It’s easier to imagine that, when he discovers that one sheep is missing, a shepherd might feel worried, or guilty, or angry at himself for messing up. But it’s much harder to imagine that a shepherd would risk digging himself into an even deeper hole by abandoning the entire flock to go search for one lost sheep.

But, in Jesus’ parable, that’s exactly what the shepherd does. He risks everything, he risks the entire flock, in his all-out search of the one. And he really searches – not in that

characteristically-male once-over-lightly, “Gee-honey-I-can’t-find-it” kind of looking. He searches and searches until he finds the sheep and hoists it up on his shoulders and carries it joyfully home.

You see, Jesus’ parable is not about effective shepherding strategies or how to manage risk in animal husbandry. The point of the parable is this: the shepherd is 100% sold out for that one sheep. He devotes himself completely to it, so that, in the end, there is nothing but joy.

And once we get the point of Jesus’ parable -- that God is *that* kind of a shepherd -- we find ourselves asking, “What would it be like to have a shepherd like that? What would it be like to have someone who is 100% sold out for me? What would it be like to have someone in my life who risks everything, without so much of a second thought, for me and my welfare?”

We know glimpses of this. We’ve had experiences, magical moments, when we’ve felt 100% sold out for someone else:

- When we were newly in love
- When we held our first baby in our arms
- Those times we’re suddenly overwhelmed realizing how much someone means to us.

But those are just moments. We’re not 100% sold out for anyone all of the time. We’re too busy with ourselves. We’re too busy taking care of our own wants.

* * *

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” Friends, here is how it all comes together. When, in faith, we know God, God as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, this is who we know – we know a shepherd who is 100% sold out for us. We know a God who sold himself out for us completely by searching so hard to find us – searching all the way to the cross. What is it like to have someone who is 100% sold out for us? It’s like having a shepherd, having a God, like Jesus Christ.

And if we have a shepherd like Jesus, if we have trusted ourselves, body and soul, to the One who has sold himself out for us -- then how can we be in want? AMEN

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