

## ***The LORD is my Shepherd***

### **Let's pray.**

Here and there, over the last season, I've been praying and thinking about this summer and what God might want for us.

And after a year in the Exodus story, and our journey through Rooted, Philippians and Life in the Spirit the previous year, it seemed good for us to slow down this summer and lean into something practical – something doable – something that scratches where we itch in reference to ordinary, everyday life with God...

And more and more, I found myself wanting to spend this summer exploring some ***rhythms of grace*** – a few essential **habits, disciplines, practices** – that help us walk and live our lives close to God – ***close enough to make a difference...*** Disciplines, practices, **rhythms** that help us ***draw near*** and ***stay near*** to God in the here and now of our everyday, ordinary lives.

And I finally carved out a day – in May – to map out what this could look like – what disciplines, practices, rhythms we could learn and lean into...

And I'll be honest, by the end, the whole idea (at least for this summer) felt tiring – and what remained and ***stirred*** for me – was the simple desire to just enter into **one practice** together... **one** rhythm of grace together – for the summer. Rather than learning about a bunch...

And so this summer I want to invite you into one practice or rhythm of grace that I have come back to **every summer for about 20 years now** (and yes, I’m 41 – so virtually half my life). And specifically, it’s something that I have leaned into every time I’ve ventured off on summer holidays (so you know *it can’t be onerous!*).

Though let it be said, this is not something that **requires** the leisure and spaciousness of holiday. It is an **everyday** practice for everyday life.

And, as the bulletin might have already told you, it’s the simple practice of **praying the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.**

And not just praying it, but **living with** the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm... Allowing the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm **to lead us in prayer**... Allowing the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm to reorient our vision of life... Praying **through our lives** in the light of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

And in the process, **allowing** and **experiencing** the grace – the **good news** – revealed in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm – **renewing** and **restoring** us.

As the psalm itself promises: “He restores my soul.”

And the reason I’ve come back to this psalm again and again (more than any other psalm) is this simple and unique reality that though, as a pastor, I am a shepherd – **I am also a sheep.**

If you were to step into my office after the service, you might notice the words of Jesus to Peter written on a note above my desk (**from John 21**).

In the wake of Peter’s denial of Jesus, **Jesus**, after the resurrection, comes **to reinstate Peter** – to call him again to be His disciple and apostle.

And in a series of questions meant to restore Peter’s heart and calling (undoing his shame in the process), Jesus speaks **three commands** to Peter – commands that would define his life...

He instructs Peter:

**Feed my lambs.**  
**Take care of my sheep.**  
**Feed my sheep.**

From here on out, Peter would be a shepherd to the church.

And these words – this calling – shapes and defines **my** life.

And if you were to listen in on an elders meeting, you’d **often** hear us begin with the words of the apostle Paul to the elders in Ephesus.

**Acts 20:28** – “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”

Again, these words – this calling – shapes and defines **my** life.

**And yet**, at the same time, **like every follower of Jesus, I am a sheep. A sheep who needs a Shepherd.**

And so **every** summer, and especially on holiday, I **run to Psalm 23**. Or, more precisely, **I run to God in Psalm 23** – to soak in the renewing and restoring grace that **I have a Shepherd**.

*That I am not alone in the world... I am not adrift... And it's not all up to me or on me. I don't have to know everything, do everything, fix everything. It's not all on my shoulders...*

No, **I have a Shepherd – and we have a Shepherd – and it's Jesus.** And **He** is at hand and at work – with me and for me, and with us and for us – in all that life brings...

*Oh, psalm 23 is a psalm I have **needed** to return to **again and again** over the last 20 years, and I don't see that changing anytime soon.*

Truth is, I've needed it **this last week.** I've run to God in this psalm this week – completely apart from my need to prepare for this series.

**I NEED the grace of God revealed in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm – and I know I'm not the only one. I'm convinced we all do...**

And so we're going to spend the summer in this Psalm – walking and praying through it line by line – because we all need this. And not just for one Sunday. We need a slow and deep immersion in what this Psalm reveals – with the prayer and hope that we'd come to **live psalm 23** more. *That it would become **our story** – the testimony of our lives.*

Not just a beloved and familiar psalm read at our funeral, but the very testimony of our lives. That we'd be people **who've lived Psalm 23...**

**Which is why WE HAVE this Psalm.** Because it's not just David's unique testimony – for us to admire and covet. No, it is **a revelation of what God wants for all of us...** A revelation of a **life with God** available

and open to all of us in Jesus, and because of Jesus... A life of knowing and experiencing **God as our all-sufficient Shepherd, Refuge, Sustainer and Restorer** – through all the seasons of our lives...

So, before we go any further, let's stop and **simply read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm** together.

Now I'm sure some of us have it memorized – from different translation. And that's great. We'll draw on all the nuances this summer.

But this morning, let's read this together from the version on the screen – which has some of the variations added in as we go (In other words: **pay attention**)... **Psalm 23**

*The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing – I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
He leads me beside quiet waters,  
He refreshes (restores) my soul.  
He guides me in paths of righteousness **for His name's sake.***

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley – 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 your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,  
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Let's pause for a moment and let me ask you: **Where are you in this psalm? Where is your life right now named in this psalm?**

## ***Where do you need to know the LORD as your Shepherd?***

Let me read it again for us – with these questions in mind...

### **Psalm 23**

*The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing – I shall not want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,*

*He leads me beside quiet waters,*

*He refreshes. He restores my soul.*

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

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley – 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 your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,*

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

I don’t know if I have ever turned to this psalm and not found myself somewhere in it – named or addressed by it. Sometimes I read a psalm and I can’t for the life of me connect with it. But ***this psalm*** – this psalm **always** connects with me – always ***finds*** me – always **locates me**.

*In want. In need of rest. Staring down a dark valley. Facing enemies.*

**This psalm always locates me.**

Not that my experience always aligns with what I hear in this psalm.

Sometimes the psalm names ***what I most ache for*** – be it, contentment (to be freed from insatiable wanting), or the ache for rest (for a weary mind or heart or body), or the ache to be led in paths of righteousness or simply to know the hope that ***God will guide me***.

But no matter what, I always find myself in this psalm.

*I think that's what God intended.*

But the **danger** for all of us – the danger this psalm confronts – is that wherever we are in this psalm – wherever life has us – we end up **thinking, feeling and living** as though **we are ALONE...**

***Without a Shepherd.***

***Adrift.***

***The captain and crew of our own ship.***

***The One on whom everything hangs...***

Do you ever feel that way?... ***You're not alone. We all do.***

Which – as some of us know by experience – is ***exhausting.***

It's an exhausting way to live.

And sometimes, it's simply ***impossible.***

*Sometimes the darkness is too much for us.*

*And the enemies too many or too large.*

*And our thirst too strong and the paths too confusing...*

*Sometimes life – as we know it – is more than we can handle.*

I know these are some of the things that have sent me running to Psalm 23 over the years.

***Running to the good news that this Psalm declares...***

Because, for all of the ways this psalm locates me and names my reality – ***and yours*** – it also tells us ***a different story. A different story***

***about the life we are living... That we are not alone! We are not adrift! We have not been left to ourselves!***

No, ***we have a Shepherd!***

Which means: our lives – your life, my life – our lives are lived within the ***strong, competent, all-sufficient, all-knowing, ever-loving, utterly-attentive and always-working Shepherding Care of God.***

And not just when things are going well – but *all the time, in all things.*

In a way that can ***SUSTAIN US*** *in and through all things.*

Because, as the psalmist (David) declares: ***the LORD is our Shepherd.***

I love how the structure of this Psalm announces this too us.

If we're paying attention, we'll notice that **God is named** only **twice** in this psalm – in the first line and the last.

**Psalm 23:1 – “The LORD is my shepherd...”**

And then at the very end of v.6 – “*And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*”

**And in between** – **at every turn** – Psalm 23 invites us to see and know and trust and expect God – our Shepherd – to be at hand and at work.

Not rescuing us from the dark valley but sustaining us *in & through it.*

This reality of **God's Active Presence** frames *not only the psalm*, but it frames our lives... **We are hemmed in – at every turn – by the LORD who is our Shepherd.**



Which, as we'll see in our study this summer, is no distant and passive role, but the most intimate and active part.

I love how Eugene Peterson, a life-long pastor and translator of the Message, explains it. **He says,**

"Psalm 23 is a convincing witness that God is our Shepherd, that God is the Shepherd who preserves us, accompanies us, and rules us. He doesn't just create us and turn us loose to make the best we can of it. He doesn't just let us fend for ourselves until we die and are hauled before the judgment seat for an accounting of our conduct. He is the Shepherd who guides us in our wanderings and sustains us in our fugitive lives." (103)

*In want and in abundance.*

*In trial and in blessing.*

*In humble discernment and foolish mistakes.*

*In the face of enemies and in unexpected homecomings.*

**"He is the Shepherd who guides us in our wanderings and sustains us in our fugitive lives."**

**"The LORD is my Shepherd."**

The **LORD**.

Notice that the LORD here is in **ALL CAPS**, right?

Which tells us that this is not just **some** God. This is no generic God. God in the abstract. A cosmic power. **The** God we hope it there...

**No.** This is the God who has revealed himself... David's Shepherd is none other than **YAHWEH** – the Covenant-Keeping, Rescuing God who revealed himself **in the Exodus!**

YAHWEH – is David's Shepherd.

*The God who **made the world and loves all that He made.***

*The God who **hears the cry of the suffering and the oppressed.***

*The God who **makes promises and keeps His promises.***

*The God who **acts in compassion to save – to rescue His people.***

***Not because they deserve it but because He is gracious.***

This God is ***David’s Shepherd.***

The **LORD – YAHWEH – the Rescuing God of Exodus.**

Which, after our journey in Exodus this year, makes my heart **cheer.**

Because of all we’ve seen and learned about God in Exodus.

A month ago, we concluded our study in Exodus ***with this hope*** – that the God of Exodus isn’t done in Exodus 40. That the God of Exodus isn’t done ***with us and with the world... His story is not over.***

And here, centuries later – we find the psalmist – King David – celebrating that YAHWEH – the Rescuing God of Exodus – is ***the God who Shepherds him...***

Which matters, doesn’t it?

Because someone could read or hear this psalm, or look around at the life they are in, and ***wonder if the God of Psalm 23 is worth TRUSTING. Worth WANTING.... Wonder why anyone would WANT the LORD to be their Shepherd.***

I’m sure we all have friends, family members, neighbors who wonder why we’d ever want the LORD to be our Shepherd. Maybe some of us are asking this...

But this name – **LORD** (written this way – in all caps) – YAHWEH – the God revealed in the Exodus – gives us every reason in the world to **want** Him **to be our Shepherd** – the One we look to *to lead and guide us, to provide for us and protect us, to sustain us and bring us home.*

Because He is the God who saves.

The God whose Way leads to life.

***The God – the Shepherd – who has laid down His life for His sheep – in Jesus...***

As this psalm **and the cross** will attest, this is a God worth trusting – worth wanting... **worth running to today...**

Which brings us to the final word in this opening declaration that deserves our attention – and it is the simple word: **MY** - “*The LORD is my Shepherd.*”

There’re **two things** worth noting here.

The first is **a cultural matter.**

And the second **a gospel matter.**

So, first the cultural matter.

And I don’t think I can distill it better than Kenneth Bailey (a lecturer in Middle Eastern Biblical studies). **He explains,**

"No sheep is ever taken out to pasture alone. The cost of the labor involved would be prohibitive. A flock is thereby **always assumed**.

***But in this famous psalm, the focus is on the individual."***

**Note that.** He goes on,

"In the highly individualized **Western** world [where we live], the importance of **community** is too easily forgotten when matters of faith are under discussion.

In the East, the sense of community is so strong that the importance of the **individual** within that community can be neglected."

Which highlights the significance of David's **MY**.

All that to say, heard in its context, this **simple MY needs** to taken to heart. It actually says so much.

Yes, YAHWEH – the LORD – is God over all. All time. All things. He created the universe and loves all that He has made. And so His concerns must involve **far more** than any one of us and the particularities of our individual hearts and lives.

**And yet**, this simple word **MY** invites us – me and you – to accept and embrace the grace that although God's concerns must entail **far more** than any of us, they entail **nothing less** than us – than **you... and me**.

David's claim here is a startling revelation of God's personal and intimate interest and attention **to every one of our lives – including yours and mine** – down to the last hair on our heads (as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount).

And so, David, the psalmist declared with thankfulness and joy, "The LORD is **MY Shepherd**."

**My** Shepherd.

Which leads us to the second (and final) word about this word **MY**.

And it’s the matter of the gospel.

The matter of how God – the LORD – YAHWEH – becomes our Shepherd, and how we His sheep.

***Because none of this Psalm matters today or ever – unless the LORD is our Shepherd, and we His sheep.***

Sadly, there are many people who know this psalm by heart, who have it as a plaque on their wall or a magnet on their fridge, ***but who know nothing of its reality in their lives.***

And maybe this is **some of us** today. Maybe this is **you** – and you know it.

As I’ve talked today about the grace of knowing the LORD as Your Shepherd – you know that ***this is not your story***. No one commands your ship but you. No one cares for your life but you. Your ears are not tuned to His Voice and your feet don’t follow His call. You have not entrusted your life to the wise care and loving rule of God in Christ.

Yes, you may know this psalm, but you haven’t experienced it firsthand.

And if that’s you, could it be that you are here today because ***the God of Psalm 23 – the LORD – the Rescuing God who has revealed Himself in Jesus – wants to rescue you...? To find you***

***wherever you are and lead you into the grace of life in His Rule and Care?***

Oh, it will mean ***giving up your rule***, but, as this psalm testifies, and as many of us in this room can testify, you will receive far more than you will ever be asked to give up.

If that’s you, hear the words of Jesus today, who says to everyone one of us – in **John 10:9-11.**

*“I am the gate: whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

*I am the good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

Which is exactly what Jesus has done for you – and for me.

To forgive the sin of **our prideful attempt at self-rule** – and to make a way for us to be restored to life in His Rule – and Care.

To be people who can say in truth – “The LORD is **my** Shepherd.”

Friends, wherever you find yourself today in this psalm – **this is the gospel** – that in the grace of God, this invitation to experience the life described in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm – is open to every one of us – in and through Jesus... **everyone on of us...**

**But the invitation of David’s simple MY isn’t just for the previously unconverted today.**

Like many of you, I have known and followed Jesus for years now – and yet every time I come back to this psalm I find myself **startled and humbled** by how easily and how often I have drifted from seeing and knowing and living in the grace and confidence that the LORD is my Shepherd... That my life is in His attentive, active care.

If anything, my propensity to anxiety is a regular indicator that this has slipped from my vision. That I have become so focused on figuring out where next to find water, or how to get out of my dark valley – while all the while **my Shepherd has been faithfully at hand and at work.**

Makes me think of a story that my grandfather, who was also a pastor, once told when preaching his own series on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

A little girl was asked, one day in Sunday school, to stand and recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

She stood, excited and nervous and **blurted** out,

**"The LORD is my shepherd. *That's all I want.*"**

And sat down.

**"The LORD is my shepherd. *That's all I want.*"**

Clearly she missed a lot of the psalm – and yet did she not distill **the heart of it all?**

Because having the LORD as our Shepherd is **the heart of it all.**

***The Fountain of all the rest.***

And yet so easily we end up just trying to ***get out of our dark valley.***

***Obviously to the One who is with us, who loves us, and who knows the way.***

Oh, we need a season in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, don't we – that we might learn to live our lives in the grace and confidence that the LORD is our Shepherd...

***So, who's your shepherd?***

***To whom have you entrusted your life?***

***To whom are you looking today?***

***For whom are you listening?***

***To lead and guide you, to provide for and protect you, to sustain you and bring your home?***

***And will you trust and follow where He leads?***

***Today?***

***And in all that is to come?***

**Let's pray.**

*invitation to the Lord's Table -----*