## Psalm 23

1The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

2He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

3he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

4Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

5You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

## John 10: 22-30

22At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”25Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; 26but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. 30The Father and I are one.”

“What To Do About the Sheep”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

You’ve been saved! While you may be thinking that I am talking about Jesus’ saving action for us on the cross and the various theologies around sacrifice and atonement, you may rest assured that I have pondered my way through this idea in the course of the week, and you have been saved from hearing that sermon this morning. My musing about this came from speaking with a friend of mine I have been out of touch with for quite a long time. Hers is a brand of Christianity that exercises the use of the term *saved* regularly, and her reliance on her faith is fairly concise. She wants to remember that God is with her when she sometimes struggles even many years after her husband, my big, burly friend Joe died. She wants to be held up in her grief. In thinking about her this week, I found myself deciding that we really need to talk about sheep. We *are* saved, and through Jesus’ actions on our behalf, and this morning I want to talk about the way our lives are changed by the resurrection—not, though, to make us think only of life to come, but to have us think of life in this moment, as well.

To talk about abundant life in the context of John 10 and Psalm 23, we really need to know a little something about sheep, and like the disciples, we can find ourselves at a loss for understanding without a little help. Without knowing about sheep; without knowing God as a shepherd and Jesus as the gate for the sheepfold, the Acts of the Apostles and what we are called upon to be and do may seem like some kind of utopian dream that fits more in a description of life in the alternative ‘60s than in an account of the early church, and of the potential for our own lives. To help us with this understanding, I *wanted* to bring a few props this morning.

You have to imagine the first prop, as unpacking has not as yet revealed a small piece of wool in a baggy with other souvenirs. I have a sad thought that I may have lost it for good in so many moves over the years. I kept the wool I found stuck in the edge of a wooden fence over which I climbed with the help of a stile. It was a bit difficult to understand why there was a fence, seemingly in the middle of nowhere where any herd was concerned. A beautiful rock wall marked the edge of the roadway just to the north of Loch Lomond, where I hiked my way northward into the higher highlands. I saw no sheep until many miles later, when I passed through the backyard of a home that could have graced any postcard. [By the way, I wasn’t trespassing; the West Highland Way in Scotland makes a route through private acreage, old drovers roads and former, ancient military ways.] Where there weren’t any sheep or cows, I saw no real reason for fences. Closer to the house of the farmers whose sheep I did eventually meet in the middle of the road some steps later, there was an enclosure. It was there that I also saw some few sheep penned in, as it were. Where they had been able to wander quite freely throughout a *vast*, larger field, there was a small protected area close to the house.

The reason that I found that bit of wool I kept as souvenir is that there was no gatekeeper for the sheep at the stile I crossed. Somehow, a sheep had attempted to pass through or over a place his shepherd hadn’t intended her to cross. While we may not have sheep ourselves, this is an image we might now begin to understand. There is a story I return to from time to time and even used as an illustration with the search committee when I first preached for them in the late fall of 2020. Fred Craddock, famed preacher and teacher who died just a couple of years ago, tells a story that may help us imagine the role of Shepherd even better. He writes, “They announced a tornado was coming. We stood out in the front yard and watched the tornado, and the weatherman was right—it was coming. We watched it move, and we thought it would change directions. Then we saw that it was not going to change directions, it was going to get our house. So we said we needed to get in the car and drive west of town quickly. We cranked up the car and started out the driveway. “Oh, no! Where’s Gretchen!? Gretchen was this little sausage dog; she was old. She wouldn’t bring anything on the market. Here comes a tornado, and we take time to go back in and get Gretchen. Now we’re reaching the level of stupidity.

The shepherd had a little enclosure out in the desert. He brings the sheep in, but there are wolves and there are cougars. The shepherd lies down across the gate thinking, *Anything that gets to the sheep will have to come by me.* Now we’re approaching something hard. What’s the name for this? The name for it is love.”

Jesus is our shepherd and the Lamb of God. Through him, and with his guidance, we are led to the safe enclosure close to home, even when we are allowed and able to make our way throughout a much larger area.In earlier verses of John we read, **“**Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” Sure, we need to graze in a much wider area than in our own backyard. We need to go out and find pasture, but we also need guidance in what to do when we get there. Sheep, without a shepherd to lead them, will overgraze in a field, so that it will not be fit for future use. They won’t follow behind their shepherd as she calls to them from ahead; nor will they stay focused and oriented without some kind of guidance from behind.

More than once, I have laughed to remember a cartoon from Gary Larson. I even mentioned it on Palm Sunday when we went outside for a parade. I thought folks would follow me in a loop to return to the front of the building, but instead went around the entire building. Larson’s cartoon had an image maybe something like that, with the words, “wait, wait; slow down - - I’m your leader.”That’s not the way a shepherd leads, and not the way Jesus does. We listen to the voice, as familiar to us as a shepherd to her sheep.Without some guidance, we are likely to graze ourselves silly, and find that others have nothing left to eat.

The second prop, one I actually have with me, was a gift from a friend of mine while we browsed in the bookstore of a Franciscan Retreat Center in Andover, MA. I like it for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is that it is the strongest magnet on my refrigerator and can hold more than one sheet of paper. That is a good image for us to hang onto while we consider its words. It reminds me that Jesus taught us to pray, “give us this day our daily bread.” For some of us, that may not seem like the abundant life that we are promised. In an essay for *Reformed World*, Zairian theologian Phillipe Kabongo-Mbaya reminds us that life for the disciples was anything but certain. Then he delineates what the abundance is for the people to whom John was writing.

Kabongo-Mbaya discusses Chapter 10 as it arises from the background provided in the chapters preceding it, and I want to quote for you some of the reflection of the “‘good shepherd’, the ‘thieves and robbers’, the ‘door of the sheepfold’, ‘abundant life’ -- all these metaphors in John 10 translate the existential anxiety and uncertainties that marked the life of an infant religious community that had already broken with the most ancient foundations of its identity. I think it is important for us to realize the scale of this crisis if we are to grasp the full depth and meaning of what is said in John 10.10.’ This isn’t the first time that we meet the word abundance in the New Testament, but it *is* the first time that abundance refers to anything concrete.” Kabongo Mbaya teaches us that earlier references are to “matters of a moral, emotional and affective nature. Only Jn 10.10, speaking metaphorically, uses this term as an adjective to qualify life, “the life in abundance” promised to the “sheep” in the new “sheepfold” of which Jesus declares himself to be both the “door” and the “shepherd”.” So, I wonder if we are to ponder our daily bread, recognizing that the abundance our faith gives us feeds our souls as well as our bodies.

For the disciples, and for us, our daily bread can have several meanings. For those who gathered together in their homes in the ritual worship of a new religion, and for us, the breaking of bread together is a powerful image—even more powerful than the magnet that reminds us of this strength. We read in Acts 2:42-47, “42They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

The early followers of Jesus do not stay in the protected enclosure of their homes; nor do they proceed only as far as the temple to pray. They step out into the wider world and do many wonders and signs. Then, they return home with glad and generous hearts. What follows is that the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

I would elaborate on this in connection to the rest of what we learn from scripture today. These disciples *are saved*—and we are saved—by the voice that guides us home. We are saved by the shepherd who cares for us enough to grant us wide, green pastures, and also the safe enclosures of our churches and our homes. We are also saved by breaking bread together, in unity, and by sharing with others so that they might know abundant life as well. I don’t mean to suggest necessarily that the physical sustenance of the bread is what saves others in Jesus’ name. Rather, I believe that our being in relationship with Jesus, and our sharing with others—in *relationship* with them—is the abundant life we are promised *right now* in the here and now. Then, in relationship with others we also find the abundant life that is eternal—with our Lord God in the kingdom of heaven. And remember what we pray in Jesus’ name, as he taught us: “God’s will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Amen