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Psalm 23

If you know any of the Psalms, there is a good chance that this is the one. The 23rd Psalm is one that has captured the faithful hearts of generation after generation. I think that is why it is used so frequently for funerals. It articulates some of the things that we cherish about our Christian faith: God's constant care for us, and the sense of comfort that we receive from that. In her temple talk about camp, Jenn Robertson spoke about blessings that she received from God through hard times in her life. I suspect that most of us – perhaps all of us – have stories about God's care and comfort.

It seems awfully silly to talk about shepherds at this time and place in history. Farms and care of livestock are not in the visible fabric of most of our lives. While odd, this prayerful confession of the Lord is my shepherd is more challenging to us than we see at first glance. We find tensions with my own life, in ways that invite us to follow the Lord as our shepherd.

We pray, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" – or "I shall have all that I need." God keeps me alive with what is most important to my existence – I

receive food, drink, protection from harm. This prayer challenges some of our most regular thoughts. There are other forces in our lives that clamor to be our shepherd, our primary guide through life. Our dominant culture, our economic system, our government, drugs or alcohol, and our jobs are a few. They try to tell us what we should do or be. We “should” rely on our government to take care of us, even though social security has been frozen, so that it’s far more difficult to live on it. People, including retired citizens, fall through the cracks of our government’s care system all the time. We receive visions of what our lives should be like, projecting for us our wants or needs. Advertising tells us that we “want” all the latest gadgets and to remain connected at all times. We “need” to spend spend spend in order to jump start the economy – regardless of whether we have the money. These shepherds are not setting us on trustworthy paths. It makes sense that we would be cautious about choosing a shepherd.

Through the waters of baptism, we were invited into a deeper relationship with and reliance upon God, as our shepherd. As we grow in faithful response, we are freed to think about our lives differently. We’re freed to respond differently to the forces other than God who clamor to claim our souls. Just think about the level of trust required by saying, “I shall have all that I need.” We trust that we will have what is most important in life – even when our wish lists may be long. “I shall have

all that I need” – even when I lose my job and I don’t know what will happen. “I shall have all that I need” – even when it’s hard for our congregation to pay our bills. I have had many points in my life when things have turned out quite differently than I would have hoped. If I had tried to predict the future, I would not have guessed correctly. Yet I still had all that I needed most. Has that happened for you?

When we pray for our daily bread in the Lord’s Prayer, we express our hope that God will give us what we need most. And the 23rd Psalm is our prayer of certainty that his will happen. With the Lord as our shepherd, whatever happens, we shall not be without the things that truly matter in life.

The Psalm continues: Our shepherd... “makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” God provides relaxed food and drink, and brings rest and rejuvenation. Part of our shepherd’s role and care is to tend to our need for renewal and re-creation.

Often it may seem like our lives do not allow for that. Our jobs, our class work, and our care for loved ones make large demands of our time. Like good Americans, we pour ourselves into our work. We support organizations with our time and our energy. We want our children to learn and exercise and grow as people

– and all of a sudden we are driving twenty different places each day. All of these things seem good by themselves. One day we're exhausted and we wonder what went wrong.

It is hard to know when to say no. It is difficult to set limits. And there are some times and situations in life when “no” is not an option. Yet God promises to re-create us. We are called to celebrate Sabbath time, just as God rested on the seventh day of creation. To honor and worship God as our shepherd involves practicing Sabbath. I confess that I struggle with this. When we set aside time for worship and renewal, we give thanks to God for all the wonderful things in our lives. Sabbath rest is an important part of how we care for one part of creation with which we have been entrusted – each of us! God calls us to be good stewards of all of it. Being good stewards of our bodies and souls as disciples involves setting aside time for God to re-create us.

It is important for us to be a part of communities like Emanuel's for our Sabbath time. We hear God's word – we're fed at Christ's table – we're blessed by the Spirit in relationships of Christian fellowship. Some times that's complicated. Relationships within the church are often just as difficult to negotiate as in the other parts of our lives. And it's certainly hard to discern where God calls us to serve in church. But those challenges are best faced alongside our brothers and sisters who

follow the same shepherd. It is our church family who can support us as we seek to follow God's call to find the joy and rest that God brings us.

The Psalm continues: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." Even as we face these challenges, God sets a table before us and invites us to a feast of thanksgiving. We are anointed as individual members of Christ's body in the world. With one another, we offer our hands in his ministry and care and witness to one another, and our neighbors. When we live with the Lord as our shepherd, it's not about being strung out. Our cup overflows, because of the way that God blesses us.

This is the beautiful shepherd that we follow: One...

- whose Spirit renews and feeds us
- whose Word and church support us as we face the demands and temptations in our lives
- whose ways lead us to a life of ministry and overflowing joy.

We already sang the Psalm together, but let's pray it by reading once again. You'll find it on the insert in your bulletin.