

Green Pastures, Still Waters

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Date: 30 July 2017

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[0 : 00] Well, good afternoon to all of you. As I was preparing this week, I had to admit, or rather came to realize, something kind of troubling about myself, which in itself is not a newsworthy event.

But in this case, I think it has particular relevance for what we're going to be talking about today. I realize the habit that I have, and that is that a lot of times when I'm talking to people and people ask me, how you doing?

I respond by referencing whatever else I say. I reference how busy I am. How you doing, Tommy? Well, it's a particularly busy season.

Things have been crazy right now. I thought the summer would be calming down, but the summer's been actually pretty full. Things are crazy right now. It's a Christmas season, so things are always kind of out of control. Whatever time of year it is, whatever time of day it is, however I'm actually doing, typically I will make some reference to how busy I am.

And here's the thing. I'm not just trying to sound important. I'm not just making things up. I am, in fact, busy most of the time. And then most people I talk to seem to do the same thing.

[1 : 10] It seems to be a very common sort of language, almost an aspect of the D.C. subculture. The only acceptable answer to how are you doing is to say, well, I'm all right, but things are kind of crazy right now.

It's just a norm. And it got me thinking, why? Why is this such a common way that we describe our lives? And if you're anything like me, and I know some of you well enough to know that a lot of times it's true.

We're pretty busy people. We live at a pretty frenetic pace. So last week we started this series looking at Psalm 23.

You may have heard of it. One of the most well-known psalms in the world, if not the most well-known. And we started this weekly meditation taking this psalm verse by verse and really trying to go deep into what it has to say to us about ourselves and about God.

And we know that for hundreds of years, Christians have looked at this psalm and believed that it's describing Jesus, that when God talks about being the shepherd of his people, that Jesus is that shepherd.

[2 : 18] He's the fulfillment of that promise. We talked about that last week. And so this week, last week we looked at verse 1. This week we're going to look at verse 2. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters. And as I looked at this verse and I thought about this aspect of my life, the busyness and the craziness, I came to ask this question.

Is that just a function of living in D.C.? Is that just the way it is here? Or is there a deeper spiritual reason, a problem, the evidence of which is this frenetic lifestyle?

So that's the question I want us to consider. We're going to look at verse 2 of this psalm and we're going to ask first, what does this have to tell us about us? And then second, what does it tell us about Jesus, the one who claims to be our shepherd?

So let's pray. Our Father, we do recognize that these are merely words generated by a human being, that these words that we're reading are merely words printed on a page, in a book.

[3 : 29] And yet you're a God who's promised to speak to us. You've said that through your spirit you can illuminate these words. You can fill them with power. That you can actually use them to bring us face to face with the living word, Jesus Christ.

And we pray that through everything that happens here this evening, that we would come face to face with him. And that the eyes of our hearts would be open to recognize him.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So Psalm 23, verse 2, what does this first have to tell us about us? The truth about the human condition.

If you look at these words of David, who was himself a shepherd before he was a soldier and king. He says this, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. We looked at that last week.

And then what does that shepherd do? He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. Now notice the language there.

[4 : 30] The shepherd is doing things for the sheep, which shows us what the sheep need. What do the sheep need? Well, sheep need to be made to lie down.

They don't lie down on their own. And second, they need to be led to clean, still, drinkable water. They're not very good at finding clean water on their own.

In fact, a lot of times they'll settle for very dirty, polluted water. So sheep are, in essence, dependent beings. They need to be made to rest. They need to be made to eat.

They need to be made to drink. And if there's no shepherd, the sheep suffer. So they are very dependent. They need a shepherd.

And this is essentially what it's telling us about the human condition. It's saying if we apply this metaphor of sheep to us, it's saying our deepest need is to know our shepherd, that we are as dependent as sheep, and that we need someone to make us lie down.

[5 : 34] We need someone to lead us to good drinking water. Even in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is looking out on a huge crowd of people, and this is how it describes his reaction. It says that Jesus had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless like what?

Sheep without a shepherd. This is Jesus' description of the human condition. Now, I don't know about you, but being told that I need to think of myself like a sheep is a kind of negative experience. I don't hear that well. I don't think anybody hears that well, especially if you're a religious or spiritually inclined person. The idea of being a sheep is anathema to everything that we value in our society.

We want to be critical thinkers. We want to be questioning and asking and probing and going deeper and resisting naivety and having both eyes wide open and embracing doubt and uncertainty and all of those things.

And being a sheep seems like the opposite of all that. You know, we think of sheep as these kind of blind, dumb animals that just follow the flock. That's the last thing we want to be.

[6 : 47] And I agree. And yet there's something about this metaphor that David would apply not only to himself, but to all of us.

And so what I want to do now for the next few minutes is just consider this claim that we need a shepherd, that in many ways we're like sheep, whether we admit it or not, and just look at our lives and ask, is there any evidence that should make us consider that this might be speaking about us? There's an interesting book that I came across in my preparation for this by a guy who's actually a shepherd. He, I mentioned it last week, if you were here, he spent years as a shepherd and then he wrote a book on Psalm 23, infusing it with all of his reflections about being a shepherd.

Most of us are city people. I have no idea what a shepherd lifestyle is like. And this guy wrote a book from that vantage point. It's very helpful. And he looks at this verse, he makes me to lie down. And he says there are actually four common reasons why sheep refuse to lie down. There are four things that keep them on their feet and moving, even if they're exhausted. And helpfully for us, he gives them all an F word, so there's nice alliteration.

[8 : 00] So at least I'm happy with that. But there's four factors. Fear, flies, friction, and famine. One, hunger and thirst, right?

So fear, anxiety about primarily predators. If you look at sheep, they are 100% prey. There's nothing predatory about sheep.

They're 100% there to die. Probably at the hands of another creature, right? And so they're defenseless. And so they're constantly on alert for threats because everything is dangerous. If you're a sheep. And it's because they're helpless. You know, most of their environment they cannot control. And so they huddle together and hope to be closer to the center and less vulnerable, right?

That's basically all you can do if you're a sheep. The next thing that keeps them on their feet. So if they're wary about predators, they're not going to sit down. They're going to be nervous and restless and looking around.

[9 : 01] They're not going to rest. The next thing that keeps them on their feet is flies. Flies and pests and things and things that are kind of buzzing around them. These annoyances. They'll stand and they'll stomp and they'll shake their heads and they'll shake their coats and they'll do everything they can to keep these bugs at bay.

But they won't rest. And then the third thing is friction. And by that, what he means is there is constant infighting in any flock. I don't know if you know this.

I didn't. But there's constant infighting. Because sheep are very particular about the hierarchy. Every flock has a hierarchy. And every sheep knows their place in the hierarchy.

And these things are pretty specific. So with chickens, you call it a pecking order. With sheep, you call it a budding order. My kids in the morning worship service, I heard this really loud laugh from my kids who are four and seven when I said the budding order.

But there is a budding order. And that means that they will headbutt each other and use that as a way to establish a hierarchy. So they're constantly jostling for positions.

[10 : 05] So that keeps them on their feet. And then the last thing is famine. Hunger and thirst. If they're hungry or thirsty, they will go off and wander and scatter and they will easily get lost.

Sheep have a horrible sense of direction. And so they will just get lost looking for food and drink. And he says, of particular danger is the drink part. Because there are lots of little polluted potholes in places with stagnant, nasty water.

And sheep don't really know the difference. And if they can't find clean water, they'll just settle for the polluted water. And so they get parasites and nematodes and things like that. So he says, all of these are reasons why sheep will, instead of lying down and resting, they will wander and scatter and stomp and shake and bud each other until they're utterly exhausted and depleted.

And more vulnerable to die. And so he says, these are problems. And he says, unless all of them are dealt with, unless all of them are dealt with, sheep won't lie down. And so as I looked at this list, I did start to reflect on my life.

And I started to think, what are the things that might have parallels into my life? Is there evidence that I'm actually living like a sheep without a shepherd? And I wonder if you might ask the same question.

[11 : 18] As we look at the same four categories applied to us. First category is what? Fear. You know, we talked a lot about fear and anxiety last week. I've realized actually recently that I'm more anxious than I thought I was.

I didn't used to think of myself as an anxious person. But man, I had this crazy dream this morning. I woke up at about five o'clock in the morning. I dreamed that I was in this tiny pond and I was on this really big wave runner.

I don't know. It started out as a fun dream. And I was, all I could do was one big circle. So I was just going, yeah, yeah, yeah, around this tiny little pond. And then I lose my balance. And I fall.

And I fall near the shore, but I'm too far to kind of reach the shore. And I fall into the water. And if you've ever jumped into a pond, you know the bottom can often be real slimy and you can sink down into it. Well, I jump in the water and I sink down into the slime under the water.

And I sink down so far that I get stuck. And in my dream, I'm holding my breath and I'm panicking and I'm completely stuck in the mire and I'm looking up out of the water, but I can't get out of water. And I'm feeling like any minute I'm going to drown.

[12 : 21] And I wake up throwing my pillows off and gasping for air. What does it mean? Can somebody tell me? Can somebody analyze that?

Well, whatever else it means, I think there's some anxiety going on in here. And I think we all wrestle with that. I think we all wrestle with the sense that most things in life we cannot control. Outcomes and other people's opinions and the future and other people's choices and our own health and the health of people that we love. We can't control these things. We are helpless. It produces tremendous fear.

You know, I was just at the hospital visiting a couple. Their child, they've done everything they can for their child, but the child is in the intensive care unit because there are health issues outside of their control and they feel helpless.

They're right. We're helpless. So there's fear and anxiety. I think that makes us restless. And you say, well, I lay down at night. I get good sleep.

[13:19] That doesn't keep me from lying down. Well, I think what this is really talking about and pointing to is not physically lying down. When does your soul lie down? When does your heart lie down?

How long has it been since you had a sustained period of feeling contentment? I'm at peace. I'm content. My heart is at rest. My soul is lying down.

I think fear and anxiety drive us. They churn away, right? Now let's go to the next one. Flies. Again, I don't think many of us have to literally deal with flies.

Actually, we were away for vacation and when we came back, our house was infested with flies. I don't know why. It's horrible. It's like a biblical plague. We've killed most of them. But I think what this is talking about, as it applies to us, is not literal flies.

I think it's the effect that flies have on sheep, which is perpetual distraction. They're perpetually distracted. They're so distracted that they can't lie down. And think about our lives.

[14:28] How many of you, how many of us, are perpetually distracted? You know, this past Friday, Laura and I celebrated ten years of marriage.

Ten years of marriage. Fantastic. Very excited about that. Some of you here, that's like a drop in the bucket. So thankful for you. But for ten years, that's a long time.

It feels like we're no longer newlyweds. And we, and that was great. And yet, you know, we got married in 2007. That was a big year. Why? Well, that was also the year that the first iPhone was released.

And so, some of you weren't even born then. But the first iPhone came out. And, and, and, and I remember, it came out about a month before our wedding, which was late July. It came out like late June.

And I remember not long after we got back from our honeymoon, we went out to get new devices. I guess one of the things you do is newlyweds. Whatever. And we, and Laura got, I got a new iPhone and Laura got a Blackberry, which, you know, we called a Crackberry back then.

[15:31] Because they were all the rage. But this new iPhone thing had come out and I remember sitting in bed that night and like most newlywed couples are doing, we're looking at our devices. And, and, Laura is, has her Blackberry and she's kind of, and I have my iPhone and I remember Laura kind of looking and looking back and looking and then kind of setting hers aside and leaning over and being like, wow, it can do that?

And then the next day we went back to the store and swapped her Crackberry out for an iPhone. And we've been an iPhone family ever since. And I'm not saying that proudly. Because ten years in, honestly, we look back and we wonder, how different would our marriage be?

How different would our home life be if we hadn't made that decision? If we had said no, right? Now we couldn't have known then where the world would be now.

We couldn't have known what our life would be like. But we wonder, are we better off? There's a man, big deal in Silicon Valley named Tony Fidel. You may have heard of him.

He founded Nest and before that he was a senior VP with Apple and he is called the father of the iPod because he was largely responsible for the iPod's existence. And then later he was instrumental in bringing the iPhone into every home.

[16:46] So he's a big deal. And he gave a talk recently at a design conference. They're talking about the power of design. And he expressed significant regret over these devices.

He says, I wake up in cold sweats every so often thinking, what did we bring to the world? And he says that our world is now one in which screens are everywhere.

And they're distracting us. And they're interrupting what's important. And at the same time they're promoting a culture of self-aggrandizement. And he says ultimately that all of this addiction and distraction and kind of perpetual, you know, that all of that is actually designed into the devices.

And so he says this is a design problem. If you know anything about Silicon Valley and the history of the culture there, back in the 60s, there was a lot of idealism in Silicon Valley about this new thing called the internet and how the internet was going to transform the world by bringing people together.

It was going to result in this kind of utopian vision being realized where people all around the world are connected as one and it's this community building relationship enhancing technology.

[17:57] And then Fidel says all of that changed. All of it changed. That got scrapped. Why? The designers.

Who was designing these products? Mostly young, white, unmarried men in their early to mid-twenties. They were the designers.

And he said a lot of these guys did not have community building and connection and relationship on their mind. And so the products got designed around values like individual empowerment and personal freedom.

And so what you have is this whole community building aspect pushed to the side and you have devices that create tiny little microspheres of individualism. And that's the net impact that they have on us.

They atomize society. And so he says a lot, and this is really interesting, a lot of those same designers are now older and they're married and they're having kids and they're looking back and they're rethinking these design decisions and saying, like Fidel, what did we do?

[19:04] Right? So the point is, I think, regardless of what's happened, we can't go back now. We can't change that and the impact that it's had. But I think the reality that we need to admit is that I think we are all addicted more or less to the internet.

We're all addicted more or less to the devices in our lives. And what that means is we live in a constant state of perpetual distraction all of the time. And the longer this goes on, the more it deeply worries me.

It deeply worries me. It's not that these technologies haven't done good things to the world. It's not that they haven't helped or benefited society. But there's a huge cost that I don't think we're fully aware of.

Because what it means is that we experience, if you're anything like me, we experience the most wonderful aspects of life, like our spouses and our kids and our friends and the people that we're dating and love and the wonderful dinner parties and great food and nature and beautiful sunsets and amazing music and all of the things that God built into creation to make this world beautiful, that we experience all of that in a state of perpetual distraction.

I'm never fully present with my kids. I'm never fully present with my wife. I'm never fully present in any moment because there's constantly something pulling my attention away, distracting me ever so briefly.

[20:35] There's a cumulative effect of that. So I like to say I'm not like a sheep and I'm not bothered by the distraction of flies, but I would say, if I'm honest, I am.

Only the buzzing isn't out here. It's in my pocket. But there's a constant buzzing in my life. Perpetual distraction. The third thing I think that we should think about as it applies to us is friction.

Friction. Why don't I lie down? Is it partly because I'm so wrapped up in establishing the hierarchy around me? What do I mean by that? I mean comparing myself.

You know? How do I measure up? You know, I'm turning 40 in a month and I told you last week it's kind of freaking me out and one of the things that when you reach a milestone age like 40 and you're basically dying is you look around and you say, well, you know, what have I done in my life up to this point and then what do I hope to accomplish, you know, before I die?

And then you look at other people who are 40 or 35 or 30 or 25 and you look at all the amazing things they've done and you look at yourself and you look at them and you're like, oh my gosh, I'm wasting my life, right?

[21:48] That person is so much more beautiful than I am. That person is so much more successful than I am. That person is so much more, they're a better parent than I am. They're a better husband or wife than I am.

That person is so much more educated. They're so much more articulate. They're so much more gifted. However you play this game, social media makes it that much easier. But it's that discontentment, that unwillingness to lie down because we're constantly feeling like failures when we compare ourselves to other people.

Living in a place like D.C., it feels like everybody's smarter, everybody's job is cooler, everybody's doing amazing things and you're like, man, my life is just kind of a disappointment compared to that. And time's running out. I'm dying. I'm falling apart. What do I do? Work harder. Try harder. Make a change, right? Not lie down. Time's running out.

So I think that friction is there, right? And then underneath these three, the fear and the flies and the friction, I think the last one is maybe the most fundamental.

[22:48] You know, what he refers to as famine, hunger and thirst. Now hopefully, praise God, many of us are not dealing with actual hunger and thirst. But I think deep down, the way this applies

is there is a deep hunger for fulfillment.

There's a longing for meaning and satisfaction. And remember what he said about sheep. If they don't find the clean, pure, clear water to drink, they'll find a pothole and they don't care if it's polluted, they will drink from it.

And I think we're the same way. We start to look for fulfillment. And we take things, maybe good things in our lives, but we begin to try to draw fulfillment from them and it's drinking polluted water. And you can do this with really good things, but when you try to suck meaning out of those things, they pollute you, right? So if it's your job, you know, well my job is really the thing that gives me meaning.

That's the thing that makes me valuable and worthwhile. What happens? Well, either you change jobs every two years because no job can ever fully fulfill you or you become a workaholic and you work 80 hours a week, which many of us do.

[23 : 57] Looking for that, this is the thing that gives me value. I've got to succeed. If I fail, what does that say about me? I can't fail. Or you can take really great things like your spouse, like your kids.

Yeah, I don't care about work. I would never make that my source of meaning. I'm a family man. I most care about my spouse. I most care about my kids. That's where my meaning lies. Do you know what will happen to those people if you look to them to give you meaning?

You will crush them because your expectations will be so high. They'll be inhumanly high and nobody can ever live up to that. No marriage can live up to that.

No marriage can give you meaning. No marriage can satisfy you fully. No human being can do that. You'll crush that person. You'll crush your kids because you'll need them to measure up.

You'll need them to be everything for you. You'll crush them. They're humans. They can't sustain that. Whatever it is we look to and say, this will give me meaning. It'll end up making us sick.

[24 : 57] It'll make everybody around us sick. So anything in life can become that. So pulling all this together, David in Psalm 23 verse 2, he's reflecting on what he believes our deepest need is as human beings.

He's saying, we need to know our shepherd. The one who can make us lie down. The one who can lead us to good, still, clear water. So what's the evidence that we are sheep without a shepherd? If you look at your life, how do you know whether or not this applies to you? Well, do fear and anxiety cause you to to churn? Right?

Do you wake up at night restless? Do you do these things haunt you? Right? Do you have weird dreams about being sucked into the slime under the water? I don't know. Maybe your dreams are different. Do these things haunt you?

Are we perpetually distracted? Why do we allow ourselves to be perpetually distracted? Are you dealing with interpersonal strife or envy or jealousy or bitterness or resentment?

[26 : 00] And of course, how do you deal with your hunger and need for fulfillment? Where do you go? What do you look to? That's what it tells us about us.

All of this is evidence. It's all signs and symptoms of a life lived without a shepherd. So if that's the case, then I want to just spend our last few minutes asking, if that's the life without a shepherd, then what is the shepherded life?

What does that look like? And what does this tell us about Jesus as our shepherd? We said that all of these F words, fear, flies, famine, that they all need to be dealt with before sheep will lie down.

Well, the author of this book I was telling you about, he says that there's only one thing that's needed to deal with all of the fear, the flies, the famine, all of it. There's only one thing that's needed. It's the presence of the shepherd.

He says with his flock, the minute he would come in among his flock, the minute they would see him, realize that he was there, all these issues would go away. They would become palpably more relaxed and many of them would just, immediately when they saw him, they would just lay down.

[27 : 08] The shepherd is here. It's okay. The shepherd is here. All the infighting, all the headbutting would stop because they're no longer looking at each other, they're looking at him. And there's this wonderful encounter in John chapter 4 between Jesus and a Samaritan woman.

You know, we said a moment ago that unless we know where to find clean, pure water, we, like sheep, are going to drink from polluted water. If we can't find clean water, we'll drink from polluted water.

Well, this Samaritan woman in John 4 is such a person, right? She's looking for fulfillment. She doesn't know where to find it and so she's not looking at her job or at her kids. She's looking to the attention of men, right?

She's looking to the sexual desire of men. If there are men out there who desire me, then I have value, then I have worth as long as I feel desired, right? It's what somebody I know called lady lust. She goes, you know, I don't often lust after men. Like, I don't look at them and think, wow, I really want to have sex with that person. She says, you know, most often I look at men and I say, wow, I really want that guy to really want to have sex with me.

[28 : 11] That's my version of lust. And this woman is thinking, as long as I can be desired, then I have worth and value and meaning. And so she encounters Jesus at a well, which is not a coincidence, and Jesus says, give me a drink.

And that enters them into this conversation. And at one point, Jesus says to her, in verse 13, everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again. And of course, what's he talking about? He's not talking about the well water. He's talking about the men in her life. As long as you keep drinking from that polluted stream, it's going to make you sick. And you're just going to be more thirsty. It's not going to satisfy you.

It's amazingly insightful. And he says, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. He says, you've been with five men, and the one that you're living with now is not your husband, and that's a polluted stream.

And of course, as we hear his language and we think about this encounter, and she's a Samaritan, he's a Jew, she is bracing herself to be condemned. But what does he do? He doesn't condemn her.

[29 : 15] This is not a condemnation. This is an invitation. He doesn't say, I can't believe that you are sleeping with all these people and you need to, you know, become a secondary virgin and put your purity ring back on and promise me that you're never going to do it again.

He doesn't say any of that. He says, he says what? You're drinking from polluted water. I can show you where to find clean water. I can show you where to find life-giving water.

He's saying, you're living like a sheep without a shepherd, but I'm here now. It's okay. I'm the shepherd and I'm here and so you can lie down. He's saying, I'm the one that can make you lie down, cause you to lie down.

I'm the one who can lead you to the good water. Why? Because I am that water and you don't have to wander anymore or drink polluted water because I'm here. So Jesus is the true shepherd who has come to call his flock to himself and so I think this psalm is an invitation to all of us to come into the shepherd's presence even as he is present with us.

There's a, one final image that I'll share with you before we close and it's an image that I heard last week after the service. Steve Arpey, the priest who serves, the retired priest who's a part of our community and many of you know him because he's up front from time to time.

[30 : 31] But he told me this wonderful detail. He and his wife lived in the Middle East for years and years and years. A lot of their ministry was spent there and in that time they got to see shepherds firsthand and he said last week, you know, there's a big difference between the Western approach to sheep herding and Middle Eastern shepherds.

And he said, you know, in the West, like what we think of as is driving the sheep. You have the sheep dogs and maybe even people on horses and you're driving the sheep and you're behind them and it's fear driven, right?

You're driving the sheep forward. Maybe that's why images like God as being a shepherd is not necessarily a comforting image for us because if we think about fear and condemnation and being driven in a certain direction.

But that's not how a Middle Eastern shepherd operates and that's not the image of Psalm 23. That's not how Jesus operates. In the Middle East, shepherds lead their sheep. And you know how? They go out in front of them.

You know how they lead them? They call to them. They speak their names. Many times, they'll even sing to them. So they're led by the voice of the shepherd.

[31 : 34] They go, not because they're driven out of fear, but because they're called. They're wooed. They're summoned. And they respond. Out of trust and love. And this is how Jesus, I believe, calls to us.

In the midst of the fear and the anxiety and the busyness and the buzzing and all the craziness, I think the voice of Jesus is always calling to us. It may be through a movie or a poem or a conversation or a sunset or a service like this.

But I think the voice is always there. He's always singing. He's always calling. He's always drawing. He's always calling us. And so my prayer for us all is as we continue in this service, we're about to have an amazing baptism.

I'm very excited about that. As we spend some time in prayer, as we come to the Lord's table together, that we would all have our ears opened to cut through the noise and to hear and respond to the voice of our shepherd even as he calls to us.

Let's pray. Yes. Amen. Good morning.