

Celebrating Communion in a Culture of Disenchantment & Disconnection

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Date: 24 November 2024

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning, everyone.

I am Shantanez Yacob, and I'm with the Oakland Community Group and Yellow Oikos Group No. 5. I'm going to read to you today from the Old Testament, Psalms 23, 1 through 6, as printed in the liturgy.

The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

[1 : 15] You prepare a table before me in the presence of mine 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.

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever. Amen. Amen. So, as we wrap up this sermon series today, I hope that we have convinced you about the central place of the Psalms.

It's quite literally in the center of our Bibles as the prayer book of the Scriptures, as the hymn book of the people of God. And it's meant to be central in our lives.

God intends these prayers and these songs of Jesus that have been divinely inspired to be on the lips and be in the hearts of his people on a daily basis. And so, we hope that you'll continue on in the Psalms.

We've actually created a playlist, hopefully you've seen that, of Psalms that you can listen to. And as you're spending time alone with God in the morning or on your commute to work or washing the dishes or winding down at night, and we want to just give you opportunities to immerse yourself in these Psalms because, as the very first Psalm says, the person who meditates on the word of the Lord, the person who delights themselves in these Psalms is the person who's blessed, the person who's planted like a tree by streams of water that's flourishing and fruitful for all time.

[2 : 54] And that's our prayer and our hope for you. I can think of no better way to conclude this series that we've called The Holy Habits of Grace than with this pearl of a psalm, Psalm 23, which is all about the grace of God.

It's all about, it's a celebration of the trustworthiness of our good and gracious God. And my guess is that with the possible exception of John 3.16, there's perhaps no more familiar portion of the Bible than the 23rd Psalm.

It's very often memorized by children in their earliest years. It's been set to music by Bach, Schubert, Williams, countless hymns, one of which we're going to sing in just a little bit.

This is one of the most beloved psalms by billions of people down the centuries and around the world today.

shepherds of their kingdoms. And so here is David, the shepherd king, and he's writing this poetic song about his shepherd king, this greater shepherd king. And who is that?

[4 : 28] Well, notice the opening and closing words of this psalm. Verse 1, who is my shepherd? It's the Lord. And notice in verse 6, it says, where will I dwell forever?

In the house of the Lord. This is a psalm about the Lord. It's a psalm about Yahweh. It's a psalm about this God who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush and he said, my name is I am who I am.

I will be who I will be. I am the Lord. And what does it mean to be in a covenant relationship with the Lord? What does it mean that he has committed to you through thick and thin?

Well, that's what I want to explore today under three headings. The Lord is my good shepherd. The Lord is my good shepherd, my resurrection hope, and my generous king.

First of all, the Lord is my good shepherd. That's where David begins. Verse 1, the Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing.

[5 : 39] David says, imagine yourself as a sheep. Okay? Imagine yourself as a sheep and you're out in the trackless spaces of the mountainous wilderness of Palestine where David's writing the psalm.

And what are you thinking as a sheep? You're thinking in that place, you're thinking, I'm going to die out here on my own. I am threatened by human thieves and by wild predators.

Wolves, lions, bears, snakes, oh my. I am threatened by sudden blinding dust storms. By food and water shortages.

By loose rocks where I can just fall down suddenly into a ravine. By furnace-like heat. By flash floods. My goodness, want and hardship and injury and death are never far from me and from my young.

So what am I going to do? I'm not going to last very long out here by myself with my own resources and in my own self-sufficiency. I desperately need protection and provision.

[6 : 53] And then you realize, I have a shepherd. What a relief. I'm not alone. I don't have to fend for myself with all these external threats and all of these internal needs.

And if I have a shepherd out here in this fierce wilderness, then I have someone who's looking out for me. Somebody who's skilled. Somebody who's devoted.

Somebody who's courageous. Somebody who is trustworthy. And if my shepherd is the Lord. If my shepherd is I am who I am and I will be who I will be.

If my shepherd is this all-sufficient, all-competent, all-abundant God who is without limitation. If my shepherd lacks nothing, then guess what?

I lack nothing. I can trust and I can be confident that he is personally and lovingly caring for the needs of each individual sheep in his flock.

[8 : 01] And that I have the privilege of being one of those treasured sheep. And then David begins to list, you know, some of his essential needs.

And he says, you know, without these essential needs being met, I will die. If I lack these things, I will not be alive very long. And this is what he says. In verse 2. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. These are the legitimate needs that my shepherd sees to each day so that I lack nothing that I really need.

And Psalm 23, if you notice, it kind of follows a typical day. The day in the life of a shepherd with his sheep. And what's the first thing we need in the morning? We need food.

Sheep are kind of like human beings. We need to eat. And so in the morning, the shepherd's first basic task is to lead the sheep to graze on that new, fresh grass that sprouts in the rainy season.

[9 : 07] And this image of lying down in green pastures, that's a sign that you not only have the food you need, you have more than enough to feed on. And what else does our shepherd supply in addition to these green pastures?

It says he leads me beside quiet waters. He leads me to these pools in these mountain springs. He gets me to a place where my thirst that now as the day is going on and the noontime heat, my thirst is almost unbearable and sharp.

He gets me to a place where I can safely quench that thirst and confidently drink, even though there's all these predators around me that would attack me. I'm safe.

And now that he's sated my hunger and he's slaked my thirst, well, I can lie down at midday in a shady resting place because my good shepherd doesn't want me always on the move.

He doesn't want me hurrying and busy and exhausting myself. No, he daily leads me to a quiet place where I can rest in tranquility and freedom.

[10:15] And by providing me with rich food and cool drink and quiet rest, my good shepherd revives my spirit.

He revives my life and my vitality and my strength so that I can continue on the journey. And the psalmist says he guides me along right paths for his name's sake.

And we need to be very careful not to misunderstand this because some of us can read that and we can think, oh, I get it. He leads me along right paths so that I can prove myself worthy to be accepted as his sheep.

No. He leads me along right paths because he's already committed to me to be my shepherd. And the Christian gospel says, the historic Christian faith says, you know, I once was lost while I was straying on wrong paths.

But my good shepherd searched for me with great effort. He came and found me and he rescued me at great cost to himself. And he laid down his life for me in order to put me on the right path where he can now lead me.

[11:26] That's the gospel. And why does my shepherd do this? It says he does it for his name's sake. He does it to let everyone know that he, his reputation and his integrity as a good shepherd is trustworthy.

And that he's determined not to lose even one of his sheep. Right? So he rescues us. He provides food and drink for us. He gives us rest and refreshment to us.

He guides and he leads us. He reliably provides for everything that we really ultimately need so that we can say, I lack nothing.

My question for some of you here today is, who is shepherding you? Who is your shepherd? If it's anyone other than the Lord, if it's you shepherding yourself, if it's another person, if it's a group of people or a system of people that's shepherding you, this psalm is telling you that ultimately you're going to end up lacking.

You're going to be in a place where you're empty and unsatisfied, where you're hungry and thirsty, where you're weary and exhausted, where you are lost, exposed, and endangered on wrong paths.

[12:51] And so it's an invitation to come and have the Lord become your shepherd. But if the one who's shepherding you is the Lord, the question we've been asking in this sermon series is, what is your daily habit for feeding on these green pastures that he's so richly and abundantly provided for you in his word?

What's your daily habit of grazing on the spiritual food of divine revelation? And what is your daily habit for drinking from these quiet waters in these cooling pools of God's Spirit and prayer?

And what is that weekly habit for you of finding rest and refreshment in the Lord on his Sabbath day, of finding that spiritual rest of worshiping in his presence, being renewed by his grace and peace, being reminded of the right paths that he wants to lead you in for his name's sake?

If we ignore or if we neglect the pastures and the pools and the rest that our good shepherd is providing for us, then it may be difficult for us to affirm with the psalmist, I lack nothing.

I lack nothing that I really need. But if we are engaging with the scriptures and prayers and Sabbath rest and all the other holy habits of grace that the Lord, our good shepherd, is providing for us, then we can most likely agree with the psalmist today and say, He refreshes my soul.

[14:28] Even in the midst of real difficult times, He refreshes my soul. So that's what it means to have the Lord as my good shepherd.

But the psalm continues on. It's not just that the Lord is our good shepherd. The Lord is my resurrection hope. The Lord is my resurrection hope.

And we come now to the central verse at the heart of this psalm, and it's the reason really that Psalm 23 is often read at someone's deathbed or at someone's funeral, because it says this in verse 4.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. The good shepherd, he guides me along right paths, and somehow those right paths involve taking me through some deep and dark valleys.

These hostile places that are filled with dangers, right? Where predators lurk and where thieves are hiding. My shepherd somehow sees fit to lead me into those dangerous places.

[15:47] Into this place where, like, if a thunderstorm hits and a flash flood comes without warning, I can be washed away in an instant. He leads me down into these dark ravines that are full of shadows and gloom and distress and sorrow and fear and evil.

You know, I'm so grateful that the Bible is just honest about these things, because I've had to go through at least two significant and deep and dark valleys in my life.

Each of them lasted about four or five years. And I'm so glad that the Bible is just honest about these valleys of sickness and suffering, these valleys of stress and conflict, these valleys of grief, and the greatest of death valley, death itself, right?

I'm so grateful that there's no denial here about the valleys of deep darkness, that there is, in fact, this section of the trail, this section of the journey that cannot be avoided. And there's no bypass road.

There's no magical escape, right? Evil and death are real. We cannot deny them. They're a reality that we must face. But our shepherd will not allow us to face the valley alone.

[17:07] Right? He won't allow us to remain stuck in the valley. He won't allow us to dwell in the valley of darkness forever. What does the psalm say?

It says, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. For you are with me. Now, if you don't know this already, sheep have a very special problem, and that is that they have no defenses.

Right? A sheep doesn't really have a real bite. I mean, they can nibble on you, but they can't really do much damage to you. They have no claws. They cannot outrun any serious predator.

The only thing a sheep can really do is just butt other sheep, which is not very helpful, by the way. And so, the sheep's only security is what?

It's the shepherd. His only security is to say, you are with me. And I am not afraid, because you walk beside me.

[18:15] Here I am, down in this dark valley of evil and sin and death. But I do not fear, because your protective presence saves me and reassures me.

Now, we know that Psalm 23 is one of Jesus' favorite psalms, because of the many, many ways that he takes this image, and he applies it to his person and his work, to his identity and his mission. We read in the Gospel of Matthew these words, chapter 9. It says, When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless.

They were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. What that says is that if you try to make your way through this harsh and brutal world of evil and death without a shepherd, you are going to be full of anxiety and fear.

You are going to be distressed and dispirited. You are going to be harassed and helpless. But that's why Jesus came from heaven to earth. Jesus stepped out of eternity and into time to be God with us in the darkest valley.

[19:28] Right? He took on flesh so that he could walk through the shadows of evil and death by our side. I will not fear, for you are with me. For you, Jesus, came to be with me.

But Jesus did not just come to be with us and to comfort us with his divine presence. He says very explicitly in the Gospel of John, chapter 10, he says, 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. When the hired hand sees the wolf coming to attack the flock, he abandons the sheep and runs away.

Because he's a hired hand and he cares nothing for the sheep. But I am the good shepherd. And I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.

And I lay down my life for the sheep. The reason the Father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

[20:32] I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. Jesus came to deliver us from this dark valley of evil and death by going all the way down to the bottom of the valley for us.

By laying down his life. By going to the cross. By descending into hell. By entering into the depths of death so that there he could dismantle its power.

And then he could pass through it and come out the other side alive. He says, I've not only come to lay down my life, but to authoritatively take it up again.

And so our good shepherd, Jesus, he's conquered over the valley of death. And he's won the victory for us in his resurrection. And because God the Father brought his son Jesus through the valley of death, we don't have to be afraid of it.

Right? Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. This rod, this short and sturdy stick is used by a shepherd to fight off hostile predators that would attack the sheep.

[21 : 46] And I'm not going to demonstrate how to do that this morning. But trust me, it works. This staff, this long and slender stick is used to prod and pull the sheep to keep them on the right path.

And our resurrected and living Jesus, our resurrected and living shepherd is fully equipped with these instruments of power and authority to save his sheep.

Right? The rod of his cross and the staff of his resurrection, they comfort me. They give me security. They give me security. The rod of his protection.

The staff of his guidance, they dispel my fears. They encourage me and they strengthen me. The resurrected and living Jesus gives us hope that he will bring us through the dark valley of evil and death because he has already gone through it for us.

And he will lead us through the dark valley of evil and he will lead us through the dark valley of evil and death.

[23 : 14] Verse 5. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Now David shifts the metaphor and you have to follow him here.

Otherwise, you're thinking about sheep around a table and that's not quite right. What David says here is, you know what's better than being a sheep under the care of a good shepherd?

It's being the friend of a wealthy and generous king and being wined and dined in his royal tent. I love the shepherd. The Lord is my bountiful host, and I am his honored guest and his treasured friend, and I'm wanted and welcomed by the King.

The King is providing and caring for me through this lavish hospitality of this festive meal. This table is set with bowls and with goblets of rich food and fine wine.

There's more here on this table than I could possibly ever take in. And notice the context in which this meal is being enjoyed. It's in the presence of my enemies.

[24 : 27] Just as a shepherd provides pastures and pools and rest in the midst of predators, so mighty is this King that I enjoy a royal banquet right in front of my adversaries who look on helplessly and cannot touch me, while he pours out his costly love to reassure me that I'm his chosen and beloved friend.

My King, in all of his wealth, in all of his generosity, in all of his care, he comes in the middle of this feast and he anoints my head with oil because he wants me to have joy.

He wants me to be renewed. He wants me to be healed. He wants me to be refreshed. My King, every time I take a sip of his ridiculously expensive wine, my goblet is so quickly refilled with wine that it's brimful and just overflowing on the table.

And friends, what is this table? What is this cup that the Lord prepares for us at such great cost to himself? You see, this is why Jesus, on the night before his cross, he gathered his disciples around a table and he gave them, he gave the church, he gave us this holy habit of grace we call communion.

So that when we take that little piece of bread and we take that little sip of wine, it not only points us backwards to his cross where our good shepherd laid down his life and had his body broken and his blood poured out.

[26 : 01] But this table also points us forward to the king's banquet table and the king's feast is being prepared for us and is waiting for us in the kingdom of God. Jesus is telling us at this table that I've prepared this table for you in the presence of your enemies, in the presence of sin, death, hell, and the devil.

And I've given you this cup that's full of my shed blood as a sign of my love. And I've anointed your head with the oil of the Holy Spirit.

And these, friends, are gifts that are not only necessary, but they are sufficient to sustain you in your life with me. They're sufficient to sustain you in your journey home.

And you see, Psalm 23 is all about finding our way to our true home. And that's where it ends in verse 6. 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.

The Lord, our shepherd and our king, he's this omniscient and trustworthy sovereign who can meet our essential needs so that we lack nothing.

[27 : 16] And the end of this psalm affirms that my most basic and my most ultimate needs have to do with experiencing the goodness and the love of the Lord.

My most basic and deepest and ultimate needs have to do with living at home in the presence and in the house of the Lord without end.

And you see that word there, love, when it says your goodness and love will follow me, that word love means your grace that's freely offered to the undeserving. That word love means God's sworn loyalty in his covenant faithfulness.

And what it says there is that your love, it's not just kind of passively following me. No, your love is actively pursuing me. You're actively pursuing me with both your goodness and your love so that I cannot escape the Lord's unfailing desire and commitment to do me ultimate eternal good.

And this pursuit that the Lord has undertaken, this chase where he's nipping at my heels with his goodness and his love, it says it's going to last as long as I live.

[28 : 32] That I will be followed all the days of my life all the way to my true home in God. And because of this gracious love, this faithful love of the Lord that's attending me most closely and most unceasingly in all the little details of every endeavor of my life, I have everything that I really need and most importantly, I have a permanent dwelling place in the house of the Lord forever.

The God who's come to be with us in Jesus Christ will take us to be with him in the kingdom of God. And even now I'm invited into a relationship with this God of loving trust, of total dependence, and of absolute confidence in the goodness and grace of my shepherd king who cares for me.

So as I close, just some questions for us. Do you need spiritual nourishment, rest of heart, peace of mind, refreshing of soul?

Do you need guidance in today's moral maze toward the right paths? Do you need companionship in the dark valleys of life?

Do you need protection from evil and from enemies? Do you need a feast of love in this cold and cruel world? Do you need goodness and grace to enable you to live for something and someone beyond yourself?

[30 : 19] Do you need a home and roots and a family and a table where you can dwell securely and peacefully and joyfully? Do you need hope for a glorious future in the Lord's house forever?

All of us need all of these things. Every person you meet has all of these needs. And who is it that can meet these basic and ultimate needs for us?

It's the sovereign and transcendent Lord. I am who I am. I will be who I will be. Infinite and unlimited in power.

Who's able and who's willing to meet you in all of these needs as your good shepherd. As your resurrection hope. And as your generous king. So friends I just want to encourage us as we conclude this sermon series.

Put your trust in him. And don't be afraid. For he's our only comfort. His rod and his staff is our only comfort.

[31 : 24] In life and in death. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.