

Goodness & Mercy

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[0 : 00] Well, I want to echo David's wish for a happy Mother's Day, and I must say it was a very, very good recovery there.

And I also want to echo David's welcome of the two guys from the Upper Shira. I hope they are released from youth ministry to be able to come up and you hear from them a little bit.

But our relationship with that diocese has really enriched our Christian life, our growth in our Lord Jesus, and our understanding of his mission in the world as well, our part in it.

And I don't know if you know when the beginning of that relationship was, but it was back in 2002, 2003, right after the diocese decided to leave biblical faithfulness.

And we had to take a stand. They came to look into this, different primates from the Anglican world, and Archbishop Malango from Malawi was one of them.

[1 : 08] And he was just a tremendous support and leader for us in that time. And one of the things that sticks in my mind was something that he said in sort of assessing what the spiritual climate was in Vancouver.

He said there's a real contrast between the diocese where I'm from in Malawi and Vancouver. He said Malawi is a place where there's much poverty, and yet the diocese is experiencing overflowing abundance in Jesus Christ.

Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places they were seeing in that diocese. He said Vancouver, on the other hand, is a place overflowing with material wealth and abundant resources. But they are experiencing a severe spiritual famine. And I think that captured where we are as a culture, and certainly where we were as a church as well at that time.

And it's true of our city today now. It's true of the surroundings that we're in now as well. And that's why Psalm 23 is really important to us here in Vancouver.

[2 : 25] Because it reveals to us God as shepherd, who leads us out of spiritual wilderness. Out of a place of desert and famine.

And into the place of rich, deep blessings of God. So that our souls that are poverty stricken without Him can feast on Him and drink deeply of His goodness.

And so what we have here is a psalm that is really familiar, I think, to all of us. But it is a psalm that is much deeper than we may think of when we think of this psalm that is so familiar.

One of the things that was a great blessing in this past week was that we clergy from St. John's, along with other anti-clergy, went up to Camp Malibu up in Jervis Inlet.

Which is a wonderfully beautiful place. And there in that inlet, there is very clear water. You can see for a long time, in fact, in the world, there are very few places that the visibility is so good underwater.

[3 : 32] And you look down and you can see rocks and sea life and so forth. And you don't realize that it's not actually that close to the surface. It is much deeper than you think because the water is clear.

And that is what Psalm 23 is like for us. It is much deeper than if we just take a cursory look at it.

There is a depth there that we want to explore today.

To see its power and its beauty. It is a psalm that when we look at it, we may say it expresses an incredible trust in God.

And we may say to ourselves, do I express that kind of trust? That kind of confidence in God? And if I'm honest, I say, no, I don't.

Lots of times, I do not. But the thing about this psalm is that as you read it, the psalm itself deepens your confidence in God.

[4 : 32] And it starts right from the very beginning where David addresses God by saying, the Lord is my shepherd.

And in saying that, he reveals two profound life-changing aspects of who God is. And it changes our relationship with Him.

Because it says two things. It is saying in that line that He is the absolute power in the universe. There is none like Him. And yet He is completely committed to tending, gathering, caring, and leading His people.

In a very personal way. Both of those things are true of God. And that's why we put Isaiah 40 in the front of your bulletin.

And I wonder if you'd look at it for a moment. Because the first half of that reading speaks of God as the powerful, almighty ruler.

[5 : 34] And the second half speaks of Him being the shepherd. So look at those first lines. Behold, the Lord comes with might. His arm rules for Him.

Behold, His reward is with Him. His recompense before Him. He is the one who judges everything in the universe. But look at the second half.

He will tend His flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in His arms. He will carry them in His bosom. And gently lead those that are with young. It is an amazing combination.

You see the powerful rule of God. And yet this God of awesome power also tends His flock like a shepherd. He gathers His lambs close to Him.

Gently leads them. It's a deeply personal and loving image. He is Lord and He is shepherd. And there are two things about this.

[6 : 32] He is, because the sovereign Lord is a shepherd, it means that He does not exploit or enslave those that He rules. Instead, He calls people to serve Him in perfect freedom.

There is a liberation about having Him as the ruler. Because the sovereign Lord is a shepherd. But secondly, because our shepherd is the Lord, it means that no outside forces can prevail.

No sheep can possibly be lost. It is the power of the shepherd at work. The well-being that He has for you will prevail.

And what that means is that God's agenda is your goodness in your life. His goodness in your life. And His awesome power means that He will do it. Now that doesn't mean we always like this, being led into God's goodness.

Sometimes we rebel against it. We sometimes think that we know better than God what His goodness is. Especially when His leading contradicts where we want to go.

[7 : 41] We had a great baptism this morning. And one of the girls who was baptized was just over two years old. It's a very difficult age when you're getting baptized. She did not want to be baptized.

So when James came to baptize, she said, No! And there was quite a struggle up front here. You missed lots of things.

And the gymnastics that James went through to baptize this child was extraordinary. If he could baptize her, he could baptize anybody. And I think that's a picture of what we are like sometimes.

When God leads us into His goodness, we go kicking and screaming. And we say, No! We are called in the Psalms to trust that this powerful shepherd Lord knows our goodness.

His agenda is what is right and good for us. Even though we don't see it right away. But that trust that we are called to have in God deepens in a further way.

[8 : 44] I hope that you were all able to make it to church last week. And hear David Short's sermon. Remember, because one of the things he said is he talked about the Psalms.

And how we don't necessarily fit what the Psalms are saying. We can't necessarily say what the Psalms are saying for ourselves. So how do we read them?

He also said that King David could not necessarily say a number of the things that he wrote in the Psalms as well. He was a very, very flawed man in need of great repentance.

However, the Psalms perfectly fit Jesus in different ways as the different Psalms come up. And he perfectly fulfills all that is said about the Anointed One.

David was the Anointed One. He perfectly fulfills that. And you see Jesus really clearly in Psalm 23. And Jesus said that about himself, didn't he?

[9 : 45] He said, I, in John, am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

Now this is amazing. Jesus says, I am the shepherd of Psalm 23. And he's saying that not only does Almighty Lord God attend and eat his sheep and carry them, providing for his people. He also lays down his life for them so that they will live. It is the utter commitment of the shepherd that his death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection means life for you and me, his sheep. It means that we enter the life of Jesus, God's Son, so that we really know him. That's what it means that Jesus is our shepherd. And we actually know Jesus.

We are seeing into his heart and his mind in Psalm 23. Because Jesus would have prayed that prayer. And because he is the good shepherd, he would have been praying that song for himself. [11:00] He is the Lord who is shepherd. And the thing that's extraordinary to think about is that it fits him perfectly. Not just because he is the good shepherd, but because God's Father was his shepherd as well.

And that's something important for us to think through. Because in the psalm, we see that there has been hardship in life. And yet there is a deep contentment in God.

So that the prayer says, I shall not want. And certainly Jesus faced extreme hunger and deprivation. Forty days he fasted and then was tempted.

He was very hungry in Samaria. And Jesus said to his disciples after they said, Jesus, you've got to eat something. He said to them, my food, even though physical food is important, my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.

Lift up your eyes. See that the fields are white for the harvest. You see, God is leading him into green pastures in that place, in his hunger.

[12:10] And there's times of great turmoil and danger in Jesus' life. Not only was he tempted by Satan, but there was massive pressure to change his ministry, to be a miracle worker instead of proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom.

The crisis of choosing his disciples. The crisis of, do I go with this group, this motley creature, to continue my ministry or not. And especially the crisis on the night before he would die on a cross, in the Garden of Eden.

I mean, the Garden of Gethsemane. Because in that garden, and in all of those crises, we see Jesus spend a significant time alone with his Father.

And in that, of intentionally going out and being led to do that, the Father was his shepherd, leading him beside still waters, to know the goodness and peace and fellowship with the Father.

And God restored his soul. And it was in that Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus prayed with all of his heart, and literally we know that he sweated blood for guidance about which path to take.

[13:25] You know, if it is your will, Father, let this cup pass. But not my will, but yours be done. And we thank God. We are deeply grateful today that God shepherded him into the right pathways for his name's sake.

He was, that path became his glory and his exaltation. It is the path of life for you and for me.

And then as he walked through the valley of the shadow of death, on a cross, we know that God was with him. Into your hands I commit my spirit, Jesus said.

And we know that God's rod, the protection, his staff, the guidance comforted him. That Jesus prevailed over that temptation to fear.

And in fact, demolished the fear of death and evil on the cross. And then finally, think of verse 5.

[14:28] It doesn't, that verse here in Psalm 23 doesn't make much sense, unless it is first of all about Jesus. In fact, one writer said that it is, seems a bit petty and cruel that these prisoners would be looking on as David is having this incredible feast that God has provided for him in the presence of his enemies.

It is about shaming prisoners, reveling in their defeat. But that is exactly what the resurrection of Jesus Christ is all about.

Because Jesus triumphs there over the greatest enemies that we have of sin and death and Satan. Colossians 2.15 puts it really, really well.

I'll read it for you. It says, God canceled the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to a cross. And he disarmed the rulers and the authorities. He put them to open shame by triumphing over them in Jesus Christ. So you see, these are the enemies that God disarms.

[15:37] He makes his prisoners. And God makes a victory feast in their presence as he makes Jesus the crucified one, the Lord and the Messiah, the anointed one.

And that's why we say at Easter, he shall reign forever and ever. Jesus has defeated the enemies of sin and death. And that's why we, at the very end of the psalm, it says, Surely goodness and mercy surrounds and pursues Jesus as he goes through death to the Father's home to prepare a place for us forever.

So you can see how this psalm fits Jesus. It is about God's faithfulness in him. It is about God's Son who was shepherded and now is our good shepherd.

Jesus leads us to his goodness because of what he has done for us. Because of his own being shepherded and faithfully following the shepherd. And the baptisms that we had this morning really reminded us of this incredible thing.

It brings us home to us, all of us, what we've been talking about. Because it reminds us, baptism does, that God unites us to Jesus. So that we can say, the Lord Jesus is my shepherd.

[16:58] And so as we trust Jesus, we enter into Psalm 23. And it becomes our psalm, our prayer as well. And what that psalm basically teaches us is that you and I are on a journey.

There's a song that I've been hearing over and over again in my head as my voice played. Life is a highway. And there's a sense of that in this psalm that's very, very profound.

That a shepherd is always moving sheep to a destination. It's not aimless. They are travelers. And the movement of the sheep is always away from the spiritual wilderness and the desert that is around them.

And towards the goodness of God. That's the movement in that psalm. So God leads us to green pastures. To spiritual and physical nourishment of all kinds.

He leads us to still waters. Which is the place of safety for our souls. And he also leads us to the restoration of our souls. Which can also be translated as repentance.

[18:04] That restoration. And finally he leads us to right pathways. And all of that, what it assumes is that this congregation of St. Jonah's.

We as a church family. But also you and I as individuals. Are on a journey that is full of dangers. It is the nature of being a Christian. And being the church.

There are places, as Archbishop Malango mentioned, of spiritual famine. And they're well disguised by material wealth. And physical beauty.

There's also dangerous rapids. Of the world's values and thinking. That could really sweep our souls away. And that psalm assumes that my life and your life.

Our souls get battered in a sense. Because we experience all kinds of pain in our life. And we also, by our sin, cause pain as well.

[19:03] We have bruised souls. It shows us that in our life, also, there are many enticing paths that we can take. That are actually wrong paths. So we need a shepherd.

We need God himself to gather us to himself continually. And to lead us into his goodness. I think one of the verses in Amazing Grace really captures this sense of journey.

Of Psalm 23. He says, John Newton, in those wonderful words in the third verse. Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come.

'Tis grace that has brought me safe thus far. And grace will lead me home. You know, one definition of grace which is helpful is that it's God's redemption at Christ's expense.

And what happens in that redemption or reward is that God is giving his grace. It has happened in the past to us.

[20:03] And because of that, it will happen in the future. That's the life of the follower of Jesus. And Psalm 23 reminds you that Jesus, this shepherd who died for you, has brought you safe so far.

And on the basis of that grace, you can absolutely be certain of the future. He will lead you home. And you can only get there by following him.

Now, the right paths on this journey are key. Because they're paths that only the shepherd knows. That he prepares for you.

That he leads you into. And they are the ones that keep you safe in him. And that will bring you to his goodness. And he leads you into them for his name's sake.

In other words, they are ways that will vindicate the shepherd's good name. It will show that he was right all the time. Now, the shocking thing for us, I think, and for our culture, is verse 4 following right away after right pathways.

[21:04] It says, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. And what that means is that those valleys of darkness, the shadow of death, are every bit as much

right paths as the green pastures that he leads us into.

This is not something that we always believe or trust. But it is true here. It means that dark valleys are the place where we are with God.

That he is leading us. And he is walking with us into. It's a fact that takes much of the sting of the fear of evil out. His presence overcomes the worst thing that remains in that valley.

And that is fear. And I know that many of you, indirectly or directly, are actually going through the valley of the shadow of death now. There is real physical death in your life in some way.

There is maybe depression or darkness. There is some relationship. Yesterday, as I was working on the sermon, I got a call from a family member that my uncle had been diagnosed with cancer of a very serious kind.

[22 : 21] So that he has just months to live. A very sudden diagnosis. And immediately when I heard that news, I thought of this verse. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

Because there is a real temptation as we walk in those valleys to fear evil. But it is wonderful here in this psalm. That there is a key thing that happens in that verse.

There is change. The conversation goes from talking to the third person about God. The Lord is my shepherd. To the second person. You.

Look at verses 2 and 3. It says, He makes me lie down. He leads. He restores. But then in verse 4 and 5, it turns to saying, You are with me.

Your rod. Your staff. They comfort me. You prepare a table. You anoint my head with oil. So you see, it is in the darkness that we see God, the good shepherd, most personally and most clearly.

[23 : 26] Just as we see Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, we see the intimacy with God the Father most clearly revealed to us in that moment. Jesus is tempted in every way that we are.

He experienced death in our place. In the place of our loved ones. He has overcome death. He gives certain hope. And what this means, that hope is defined by those four central words.

I am with you. I am with you. That powerful resurrection truth is what drives away the fear of evil.

And we know it most powerfully in the valley of the shadow of death. Because it is particularly in those times that the good shepherd is with you. Loving you. Carrying you.

And leading you. This is a great light that overpowers darkness. It is good news. It is good news that shines into the worst kind of darkness or suffering or despair.

[24 : 27] There is when we particularly see the truth that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, our good shepherd. Because we know that those paths of the shadow of death are His paths as well.

It is there that He actively protects you and guides you and gently brings you back into His path when you wander or feel forsaken.

I don't know about you, but lots of times I don't know for sure how to pray for people when I hear real trouble that they are in. And I think Psalm 23 really helps us there.

It leads us to pray for people's protection. For their guidance. For their restoration. For the resting gifts of the good shepherd.

And when we go away from that shadow and think about it, we actually can leave this psalm knowing that the good shepherd is taking us to a future that is overflowing with the goodness of God.

[25 : 32] Look at how the psalms end. The abundance of the shepherd. There is the table of eternal life. Knowing God is something that you feast on right now in the face of the enemies of death and sin and the devil.

And there He anoints your head with oil. He welcomes you. He says that you are His own. That you are in a deep relationship with Him. He welcomes. Your cup overflows.

But not only that, there is this incredible line of Him that surely, most certainly, without a doubt, goodness and mercy shall follow you.

And literally, that means it will pursue you. God's grace will pursue you all the days of your life.

What a gift that instead of the enemies of death and sin and evil chasing you down, God's grace is pursuing us actively, powerfully, because God, Jesus Christ, is our shepherd.

And you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. He will lead you home. That is your future. That is certain, assured. And that's why I think Calvin, in a wonderful quote, said, As those who enjoy the greatest abundance of outward good things are empty and famished, that God is not their

shepherd, so it is beyond all doubt that those whom He has taken under His charge shall not want a full abundance of all good things.

[27 : 05] It is what the good shepherd gives. And this is what we are called to trust in here, to know it in our lives. And I don't know for sure how best to respond to the psalm.

There are two very brief things that I'll mention. And the first thing I think is really obvious, that we need to be deeply touched with a sense of our own spiritual weakness and poverty and feel our need for His protection, the protection of the shepherd.

Because He is a shepherd only to those who actually want to live in His sheepfold, who surrender themselves to be ruled by Him. So we need to know our need for the shepherd.

And secondly, the good shepherd is not only personally responsible for us, but He appoints under shepherds. Remember what He said to Peter in our first reading?

Jesus said to him, Feed my lambs, feed my sheep. Well, that's not just something for Peter. He is to model that and lead it. But it is something for all of God's flock, for each of us in this congregation.

[28 : 13] You know in your own life that the way you came to the shepherd was through a youth leader, or parents, or a preacher, or a small group leader, or a friend who reached out to you.

Our debt, in a sense, is quite large to people in our life like that. Well, God calls us to do this ourselves, to be disciple makers, to feed His sheep.

By just pointing one another all the time to the goodness of God that is found only in Jesus, the good shepherd. So may God strengthen us.

May God help us to help others to go to the good shepherd who leads, who carries us to green pastures, still waters, the restoration of the soul, and right pathways.

Let's just pray together for God's work through this song. Let's close our eyes and pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Holy Spirit.

[29 : 24] And we pray that our minds, our hearts, may always be filled with the good and certain future that is always before us in our good shepherd. Thank You that our future is in Your hands as the shepherd.

And we can pray, I shall not want all I truly need and most deeply desire I find in Jesus, the shepherd. I will fear no evil for the shepherd is with me.

Goodness and mercy shall surely follow me. And God, we thank You that we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.