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SERMON TITLE: Ps 23: The Shepherd's Love

Walking as Disciples of Jesus Series

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 23

DATE: April 19, 2020

Online service at www.fpcd.org.

Before you read the sermon, READ Luke 15:1-7. Online service at www.fpcd.org

As a child, I sang “Jesus loves me, this I know.” But I did not always feel loved. Some people struggle with faith; others with abandonment; others with trust. I struggled with feeling loved.

Struggles with faith, love, abandonment, etc., affect our relationship with God.

These struggles are not unusual. All people have areas of vulnerability. Usually it originates from your family history which will play out in your life.

Someone shared a story recently about bummer lambs. These are lambs which at birth, the ewe rejects for no reason. Some ewes are even openly hostile driving their newborn away. Without intervention, the young lamb’s spirit becomes broken. They hang their heads and cannot overcome it unless the shepherd steps in.

Jesus was not subject to those consequences from family dynamics. He’s perfect; without human fallibilities. Thus, *he can overcome many of our struggles*. As we listen to him, the goal is to let these strong hindrances go and adopt his viewpoint.

Our Scripture from Luke talks about God’s love for people. All kinds of people were drawn to Jesus and listened to him. This bothered the Pharisees and teachers.

They grumbled against Jesus because he was open to disreputable people. Nevertheless, *Jesus welcomed everybody in*. Jesus wasn’t going to let the Pharisees determine his enemies, or who would be excluded. He invited all those he wanted, which was everybody.

And the Pharisees grumbled. (They didn’t realize they had sins and shortcomings of their own. I doubt if Jesus was the only one who saw this!)

So Jesus told the story you heard to reveal God’s love for everyone: the shepherd who owned a large flock of sheep and cared for all of them, even the wandering ones. When even one of them got lost, the shepherd went to find it. And then when he found it, he held it close and carried it home—so happy he even called his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him.

The modern-day shepherd who has a bummer lamb whose ewe rejects it, will pick up the lamb, keep it with him, hand-feed it, keep it by the fire, making sure it is warm. He wraps it up with blankets and holds it to his chest so the lamb can hear his heartbeat. That will strengthen a bummer lamb enough to eventually return it to the field with the flock. When the shepherd calls, which sheep do you think runs to him first? Yes, the one who knows him most intimately.

Jesus says the happiness over this one little lamb that has a bad family history, or who has wandered off on its own but has been found and revived—the happiness over this victory extends even to the very angels in heaven; all of whom rejoice over the one who responds and turns back to God.

All heaven is thrilled for anyone to be restored. Imagine a whole stadium full in heaven cheering for one person who reconnects with God and is drawn by his love.

This made the Pharisees complain loudly. (Can you hear Jesus’ deep Sigh?)

We sang “O How He Loves us So.” It’s biblical. That’s God’s history. So let’s read Psalm 23 to see just how deeply rooted God’s love is.

To truly “hear” this Psalm, we must notice where it is in the Bible. It follows the darkest Psalm in Scripture. In fact, we read Psalm 22 during our TGIF Good Friday online video. I hope you have watched the video—you still can. Psalm 22 reflects every pain and loss experienced on Good Friday. Times were bad; there’s a ring of death, just like we are currently surrounded by dark threats of disease and death during this time of COVID-19. So we notice the beauty of Psalm 23 against the backdrop of Psalm 22. It’s like the rescued lamb against the rejected lamb. Or the personal struggle with not feeling loved or being low on faith or trust.

I went back to the original language to really delve into Psalm 23. Hebrew is a wonderfully holistic language that paints a big picture. Psalm 23 tells us how God is in the midst of our current bad, even deeply fearful circumstances. It reminds us of who God is, where we are going, the certainty that we will arrive at our destination.

Ancient Israelites were shepherds. They understood raising sheep, herding sheep, feeding and watering sheep. King David was a shepherd before he was king. He wrote Psalm 23. But not just David used this image. God uses the image throughout the Bible for his coming Messiah, and how our Messiah cares for us.

Jesus was referring to this Psalm when he was talking to the Pharisees. They would have immediately thought of it. They understood the depth of the love in it. So let's look at the meanings of the words, phrases, and images given through Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd,

First, this is a **very personal relationship**. This is not a random person who just happens to be there. It is the sheep with his or her owner, as in essence, God owns us. This reflects the dependency on and total trust of the one who willingly leans on this particular one—the Lord—for their very livelihood. With this shepherd,

I shall not do without,

Shepherds leave their villages in Israel for the open hills, hills with many dangers. There are thieves, wild animals, snakes, dust storms, water shortages, rocky terrain—let's just say "life happens out there." And yet, the sheep "shall not do without" even in the midst of an area of great want. With my Shepherd, I lack nothing that I need to travel this journey called life. He leads me to:

New fresh grass after rain, a quiet tranquil stream to rest by,

Compare the lushness of spring with all its rains to the parchedness of a hot dry summer. Notice the Bluebonnets in Texas this spring to understand the richness of fresh grass. Nothing feels better to a sheep than a full belly and a fresh, unclouded drink of water from a calm spring.

He leads me there.

You have heard "he makes me lie down" but the Hebrew actually is much more nuanced than that. Theologian Ken Bailey translates the word: "He settles me down."¹ He doesn't "drive you" or force you. The Hebrew word means "he helps you along; leads carefully; guides. God sees someone (you) through."²

He restores my soul.

Sometimes, when your spirit gets dry, you have wandered off. So this word means that the Lord "brings you back; puts back; restores to ideal condition. He takes me back to the point of departure and revives my very life to its ideal condition. Would you like that chance to undo a bad path? With Jesus anyone can undo a bad path. We wander off at times. We get spiritually dry, discouraged, fall away—but our Guide revives us again.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake,

I am part of the family and for his reputation (and mine) he leads me to rightness, justice, and what makes for a successful life. That's what it means.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil,

The Appalachian Mountains in N. Carolina are known to have some of the deepest shadows before the sun sets. Numerous authors refer to the threat of the shadows there. Now David refers

to the shepherd directly: not as "he is" but you are my company, you are with me, you are in my presence.

Your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

A shepherd's rod is a weapon. I have one here. It's a 2 foot long club with a bulb on the end, often embedded with metal. He uses it to defend against wild animals and attackers. The staff is much longer. It is a walking stick for the shepherd as well as a hook to rescue a sheep who gets off the path or stuck in a hard place. The shepherd oversees like a she-bear and its cub or Boaz to Ruth in her affliction.

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

We shift now to human images. Tables are not used for sheep nor are they prepared in fields. So let's think about this. Jesus and tables . . . Jesus and *The Lord's Table*; prepared for us; the Communion table. It is prepared right out in the open, in the presence of those who are hostile toward us. And we eat of it to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit, to remember that he gave his life for us, to anticipate his coming again. It revives us and made us clean—that's what the anointing oil signifies. There, we receive the cup of salvation—that is the cup that overflows with superabundance.

Surely 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.

The Hebrew word for goodness and mercy is my favorite—hesed. It means "faithfulness, kindness, grace, loyalty, obligations to family and community." It is the richest word, defining all that God does for those who believe. The word for "follow me" actually means **pursue me for the totality of my life**.

What blessing are you looking for? What security do you desire? What struggle do you need to overcome? Psalm 23 offers it with God, through Jesus Christ, the Shepherd who walked among us.

Jesus told the story of the shepherd and the lost sheep because He is the Shepherd—God in the flesh, here loving us, helping us, guiding us. Do you long for true security? It is found in the Shepherd's love.

Jesus is the Shepherd.

AMEN

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 40.

² Hebrew language definitions from Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew Lexicon and BibleWorks program 2007.