**Psalm 23** May 7, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Easter 4

*Psalm 23:1The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*

*2He makes me lie down in green pastures,*

*he leads me beside quiet waters, 3he restores my soul.*

*He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.*

*4Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

*I will fear no evil, for you are with me;*

*your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

*5You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

*You anoint my head with oil;my cup overflows.*

*6Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,*

*and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

This past Monday morning, one of our kids and I were driving down the road. It was a beautiful sunny spring morning; cool, not cold. Just enough clouds to highlight the deep blue sky the morning after a rain. Coming up Patriot Parkway from E-town, in one of the few places where there are no homes yet, we looked across a valley almost entirely pastureland. The grass was the dark green you only see in spring. On this morning the pasture was speckled with black dots, cattle grazing. Picture perfect. When someone finally develops that tract of land between Joe Prather and Patriot Parkway, our world will be a poorer place.

And the teenager with me said, “That is the most beautiful picture I have ever seen!” After thinking a bit, my passenger revised that statement. “It isn’t the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I can think of prettier things. But *it is* the most peaceful thing I have ever seen.” And that was a good thing, even to an active teen-ager.

Maybe you know the plot of land I am talking about. If you don’t, you can still imagine it. In either case, it is a little bit of what God wants us to imagine when we listen to the Twenty-Third Psalm. Oh sure, there are some pretty big differences between Psalm 23 and what we see in rural Kentucky. We see cattle, Psalm 23 would show us sheep. We see fenced-in fields, Psalm 23 would take us to the wide open range. But the biggest difference is that where we see livestock tended by farmers who live in houses, Psalm 23 shows us a flock whose caretaker never leaves them, night or day; sunshine, rain or snow. As we look at Psalm 23, we are going to have some things that we know, but some points that are a little different. But the main thing is that Psalm 23 shows us…

**A Shepherd for Green Grass, Quiet Water & the Shadow of Death**

**I. A Shepherd Who Gives Us the Best**

It is curious that Psalm 23 remains a favorite Bible passage. Who, these days, has sheep? In the past 30 years, how many of you have touched a sheep? How many of you know shepherds – and by that I don’t mean sheep farmers, but people who actually spend weeks and months out in the field with their sheep? I am just guessing here, but it is my guess that in the entire United States east of the Mississippi River, there is not a single shepherd like that. Which makes me wonder: How can a psalm about something so completely unfamiliar to all of us remain a favorite? Why is Psalm 23 probably the favorite psalm of all 150 psalms?

It is because of what that teenager said, “It is the most peaceful thing I have ever seen.” Shepherding may have been very different three thousand years ago when God inspired David to write Psalm 23. But some things about life don’t change. And number one is anxiety. And somehow people know, even people who have never touched a sheep, that God’s picture of us as sheep under the care of a watchful shepherd is one of the most stress-relieving pictures there is.

Psalm 23 encourages anxiety-free trust in God. It is not just wishful thinking. It is not hoping that God will give us what we need, like we hope we will be able to pay off the house before retirement if all goes according to plan: if no disasters occur, if we stay healthy enough to work, if we don’t get laid off, if… When the Christian recites Psalm 23 saying, ***“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters…”*** the Christian is not hoping that God will take care of her or him. The Christian says, “I know that God has, and does, and will give me all that I need.”

We confess that we are under his care. We declare that our God is a caring and generous God. He gives us the good things that we need in life. He gives us a lot more than we need. And every moment of every day he is tending to us.

If we want to imagine the shepherd of Psalm 23, we could begin by going out West. If you have travelled in the most remote parts of the Western United States, perhaps you have seen a sign that says, “Open Range.” It means that you are entering a place without fences. Cattle or sheep or goats can roam freely. It is public land used by those who need it, but owned by none. In a place like that David shepherded the sheep of his father Jesse. In a place like that the shepherds tended sheep who received the angels’ news that, *“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you”* (Lk 2:11). In places like that, for half of the year or more, ancient shepherds tended their flocks on the open range.

Such continual, on-the-spot shepherding is what the Christian confesses in ***“The Lord is my shepherd.”*** Not just hard-working farmers who sleep houses and come out to the barn or pasture to check on the animals at 5am. These shepherds lived with their sheep. In that open range environment sheep could not possibly survive without their continual presence. The ancient shepherd had to daily lead and guide their flock to food and drink, otherwise they would not find them. Or if they knew those resources, left to themselves the sheep would overgraze the pastures and foul the waters. The shepherd’s guidance was essential to the survival of the flock.

Declaring that ***“The Lord is my shepherd”*** says that I believe my God really is in charge of my life. He takes care of me, he manages me. He puts me in places that are best for me, even though I might not want to go there! And suddenly, when we not only recite this, but actually accept that God is our shepherd, we become contented sheep.

Shepherds who have looked at this psalm have said that the phrase ***“He makes me lie down”*** is one of the most significant. Sheep, being slow defenseless animals are very nervous animals. They know they are a lunchbox on four legs. And so sheep do not lie down unless they are very very sure of their safety. But when their good shepherd, whom they trust, steps into the pasture, the sheep lie down. It’s not that the shepherd forces them to lie down, but his presence gives them the peace of mind that they finally can lie down.

What a picture of Jesus, our Good Shepherd!

When Jesus declared himself to be the Good Shepherd, he declared himself to be the shepherd of Psalm 23. He declared the Lord’s deity for himself. And he highlights himself as the shepherd of our souls. Jesus’ greatest desire was to lay down his life for us, that we might have eternal life. All the sins we have committed over the years were waiting to ambush us at the time of our death. We were nothing but sheep to be slaughtered, to suffer eternally for our sins. But Jesus is the best shepherd imaginable not only takes care of our daily earthly needs, he also laid down his life that we foolish, sinful sheep might live forever! He enables us to lay down with peace of heart.

**II. A Shepherd Who Guides Us Through Evil**

But the sheep’s life is not all green pasture and quiet water. After talking about all the good things the divine shepherd does, the psalm admits another truth, ***“I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”*** It is a humble admission that even if God always shepherds us through life, not all is enjoyable in life.

There was a boy, who sometimes got himself into trouble with his parents, as ten-year old boys sometimes do. Often, his punishment would be to run laps around the school building they lived next to. During the daytime it was no big deal. But at night, how it frightened him! Behind the school was a narrow alleyway with no lights. And at the far end of the alley was a tall dark wooded bluff. On top of the bluff was a spiritualist camp which made his mind run wild! And if the wind was up, how the pine trees howled! The darkness of night made a run, that was only slightly annoying during daylight, into a nightmare.

We have an uncomfortable relation with darkness and night. We know that night is when thieves break in and steal. Night is when we sleep and are vulnerable. Night is when we lock our doors. We speak of dark days and black moods. In the old westerns the bad guys wore the black hats. Children are afraid, not of the light, but of the dark. Just think of what it was like before electricity and lighting for the shepherd and sheep out in the wild!

They were out on the open range, in a time before lights or guns. At night, the sheep and shepherd could hear the howl of coyotes not far away. They knew that wolves or lions stalked at night. Imagine how skitterish the sheep were in the dark. At every snap of a twig or rustle of grass, they would jump to their feet ready to run.

Psalm 23 admits that life is not all sunshine and roses. ***“I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”***You know those times, times when it feels that everyone has abandoned you or dislikes you. Life can feel like the shadow of death when we don’t live up to our commitments, when we lose a job, when the bullies make us dread getting out of bed. More literally some walk through the valley of the shadow of death in the midst of terminal illness, and how long a walk it seems!

At these times, the Christian shepherded by God can say, ***“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”*** The sheep, the believer, confesses faith that even in the worst moments of life, his shepherd is there. We know that God has taken care of the biggest of our problems. And therefore we know that even death, even that greatest evil of this world, even death is not something to be feared by God’s flock. Death, by Jesus’ grace, is only a doorway to the greatest blessing of all!

***“I will fear no evil, for you are with me”*** is a confession that just because things aren’t going the way we would like it, we do not believe that God has abandoned us. It is this confession that the “Footprints in the Sand” poem tries to bring to life. You know it – the poem of the person who looks back on the trails of life, and sees the two sets of footprints – his and his Savior’s. But the believer notices that in the worst times there was only one set of footprints, and the believer thinks that in the worst times his Savior abandoned him—that’s why they were so bad. Only then does the Savior explain that in those worst times Jesus carried him. That is merely another way of saying, ***“I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”***

Psalm 23:4 is the Old Testament counterpart of that well-known verse in Romans 8, *“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”* (28). We confess that God is with us in the biggest problems, the worst moments, taking us to the high country pastures where nothing shall ever trouble us.

Let us look at Psalm 23 not as a nice psalm for a funeral. Let us look at Psalm 23 as a bold confession of trust in a Good Shepherd. He gives us the green pastures and the quiet waters. Psalm 23 confesses that though the coyotes howl and the wolves circle, the Good Shepherd cares for us through the valley of the shadow of death, so that we ***“may dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*** Amen.