

“Steep Grade Ahead”

Life is a Highway, Read the Map – sermon #3

Psalm 23

Welcome to the third week of our series, “Life is a Highway: Read the Map.” We are on a journey together through life, and just like your family on a long road trip, we need a good map to get where we want to go. God provides us his word, the Bible, to give us direction in life. The Bible tells us our origin – we are made in the image of God – and the Bible tells us that there will be detours if we deviate from God’s plan, just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But we know God is always there for us, to provide for us and redirect as necessary, if we will just listen for his voice and read the map.

Would you please join me in prayer?

Great Holy God - Father, Son, and Spirit - you are always present in our lives. Help us to acknowledge you and praise you, not just with words or songs, but with our thoughts and actions. Help us as we enter into the story laid out for us in your word. Teach us to hear these verses as if for the very first time, hanging on every word as it proceeds from your mouth. Teach us our weaknesses, teach us our strengths, and teach us how to truly bring your glory and honor by the way we live our lives. In the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

As some of you know, my family got to take an incredible vacation to Alaska last month. The scenery was amazing: mountains, oceans, glaciers, valleys, bears, caribou, moose, whales, eagles, and this creature here, a Dall sheep. I wish this was the picture I had actually taken. The sheep we saw were just puffs of white high up on the mountains, barely distinguishable with binoculars.

As I started reading Psalm 23, the Dall sheep came to mind. Dall sheep are wild. They have no shepherd. If they fall into a ravine or crevice, there is no one to rescue them. If they are attacked by grizzly bears, no one fends the bears off. These sheep live up in the mountains, because that's the only place they feel safe. But they have to come down into the valleys for food and water, and that's where the danger is. The view might be great if you're a Dall sheep, but I would not want to be one. It sounds very lonely to live without a shepherd.

Shepherds are guides for the sheep. Good shepherds care for their flock, risk their lives to keep them safe, and lead them to places of nourishment and rest. It is no wonder King David¹, who was a shepherd himself, wrote these words to describe how he felt about God. In order to follow God, we have to see ourselves as sheep: vulnerable, needing love and care, and prone to making decisions that are not ultimately in our best interest.

I hope that you realize that we all need guidance. By looking at this particular, well-known psalm, I believe we will find what we are seeking.

Psalm 23 is a short psalm - only 6 verses - but it packs in a ton of beautiful metaphor. For starters, David says, "The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing." Other translations say, "I shall not want" or "I have everything I need." That's a profound statement, to be content. The Apostle Paul said a very similar thing in Philippians 4. "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation... I can do all this through him who gives me strength....My God will supply all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:12, 13, & 19)

¹ Although the words "of David" in the psalm title can mean that someone else wrote this psalm in honor of David, for the sake of this sermon, I'm going to presume David wrote it.

Do you see yourself as a sheep? A sheep relies on the shepherd to find nourishment and drink, green pastures and still waters. Believe me, a sheep knows the difference between calm waters and rushing waters. One of our excursions in Alaska was a white-water trip, and Katja and Lucas fell off of our raft when we hit a bump – mostly because I was “riding the bull” – the front edge of the raft, and I fell backwards into them. The rest of my family, however, with the younger children, were taking a float on the smooth part of the river.

Sheep do not like white water. If the water soaks them, they are not going to be able to swim. So the first thing the shepherd does is find safe, lush pastures and calm waters where it is safe to put down your head and drink, while the shepherd stands guard. In all of this, David is saying he feels safe and refreshed in God’s presence, no matter what his circumstances are. He says, “My soul is restored.” (Ps 23:3)

I could stop just with that verse. There are so many people in this world, and in this very church, whose souls are running on empty. They are not restored. They are anxious, worried. How do I know? Because I am one of them. I find myself running to and fro, looking for greener pastures and cleaner waters in life, not realizing that God is calling me, if I would just listen and let go. It’s not easy being a sheep. I’d rather try to sort out my problems on my own. But David reminds us, that’s not God’s way.

Look at the next verse. “He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.” (Ps 23:3) God knows the paths we are to walk on. Right paths. Paths that bring healing and blessing. I read this verse and think mainly about moral decisions, decisions that involve integrity, peace, and justice. Those are the paths God wants me to take. But notice why. David does not say, “God leads me in

right paths for my sake.” No, for “his sake.” God’s sake. Another translation says, “for his reputation.” God’s reputation is made great when we walk the right paths with God. That is much different than asking, “What is in it for me?” As a church, we need to ask the right question. Why should we walk the path of righteousness? To please God. Any benefit we derive is secondary. Probably not too many sheep are thinking about the shepherd’s reputation, but David is.

To this point, all the metaphors are peaceful, smooth, comforting. However, in verse 4, the psalm takes a turn down into the valley. Honestly, this is the part of the verse that scares me most. I used to say this psalm with my children every night, and when I got to this line, I liked to make them jump. “Even though I walk through the valley of DEATH!” Funny thing is, they were not scared. They would giggle. Why? Maybe because I was with them as we prayed. But David points out a reality that we all must acknowledge. Either we are in a valley, coming out of a valley, or about to enter into one. Valleys are a part of our existence. The point of the psalm is not to promise us an easy life. David writes these words to remind us that God is with us everywhere.

The words, darkest valley, really mean a valley with no light at all. The sheep can only navigate by listening to the shepherd’s voice. That is where faith meets the road, doesn’t it? In a valley, you can’t see which way you are going. You can’t see like you could from the mountain top. You don’t know how far, how much longer until you are out of the valley. You only know your present reality.

Let me speak to those who face a tough valley right now. God has not left you. God has not abandoned you. God has not promised any of us an easy life,

but God has promised to be with us. “I fear no evil, because you are with me.” That can be our meditation when anxiety is hitting us hard. And it will.

David goes on to remind us of the two tools a shepherd uses to keep the sheep safe. One is a rod, the other, a staff. A staff is for guidance. Sometimes, you have to bump the sheep on the head to get them to move in the right direction. It is a temporary hurt, and it might not feel good, but the shepherd is trying to prevent a worse accident, or prevent the sheep from getting lost. A staff has a crook in it, like a candy cane, for retrieving a sheep from a crevice or ravine. It probably doesn't feel good to get hauled out by one leg, but after the rescue is over, we can see how God saved us, even if it was uncomfortable.

The other tool, the rod, is a weapon, but only used against our enemies. Bears, wolves, lions – they fear the rod, because they fear the shepherd. But the sheep does not fear the rod. It is a tool of protection, not harm. The difference in how you view the rod is where you are with God. If you trust God, then you recognize that God's great, terrible, fearsome strength is actually a good thing.

Because of God's power, God can set a table, a banquet feast, for all of us, even in the midst of struggle and trials – in the presence of our enemies. This is the mindset of abundance that we should have as Christians. We should expect that God will provide his blessings, even when it seems that our enemies surround us. Listen, I am not talking about material prosperity, I'm talking about things much better than that. Love, friends, a listening ear, a meal shared with those who care about you. As Christians, we must open our eyes and expect that God will bless us no matter what is happening, in our families, in our churches, even in our country and world. This is not to deny that there are hard times – remember, the sheep went through the valley before they came to the table. But

how easy is it to walk right past the table because we don't expect it. Open your eyes, church. God has set a table for us. Don't miss it.

We come to the end of the psalm, which I put as the memory verse on your bulletin. “Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life...” That word, follow, actually means to pursue, the way the lion pursued the sheep while hunting, but now it is God's goodness, mercy, and love that are pursuing. A story is told of a little boy who wanted to walk himself to school in the morning. His mother, wanting to foster his sense of independence, gave him permission, but also called her neighbor as a precaution. She asked the neighbor to keep an eye on her son as he walked. “OK, but I'll have to take my granddaughter with me.” So, every day, the boy kissed his mom goodbye and walked the two blocks to school, while his neighbor and the little girl followed at a discreet distance. One day, another boy joined the first one on the way. “Who are those two people?” he asked the first. “Oh, that's Shirley Goodness and her granddaughter, Mercy. They'll follow me every day of my life.”

All joking aside, that's how it is with God. God pursues us in God's love. The danger is past, but God, in an ironic twist, is now the pursuer of the sheep, of us. God does not come at us with weapons, with anger, or with any device to destroy us. God comes with unfailing, relentless love, kindness, and mercy, in an attempt to woo us. It is a dynamic that is hard for us to understand. Why would God be so persistent in his pursuit of us rebels? It goes back to Genesis 1-2. God made us. God loves us. We are his children. Jesus said it best. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I am the good shepherd; 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. I have other

sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. (John 10:11-16)

One final thought. David says he will dwell in God’s house forever. That’s one of the reasons we read this psalm at funerals. We tend to think of this in terms of eternal life. But the real meaning of “forever” here is “the rest of the days of my life.” In other words, in the here and now.

The mark of a healthy church is that we are God’s sheep, living in the present. Not concerning about some distant by-and-by, twiddling our thumbs while we wait. The sheep of God’s fold are active. In prayer, in service, in giving, in loving. If we do these things, God’s name is praised. If we listen to the shepherd’s voice, he leads us to green pastures and still waters. But if we listen to our own voices, write our own maps instead of consulting God’s Word, we are not being good sheep.

The Lord is my shepherd. Is he yours?

Memory Verse: Psalm 23:6 (NLT)

“Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life...”

Reflection Questions:

1. When have you been lost? Who helped guide you back home safely?
2. How are sheep complete dependent on the shepherd? How are we complete dependent on God?
3. Do you listen for God’s voice?
4. Are you in a valley, coming out of one, or going into one?
5. How have God’s “rod and staff” comforted you, perhaps in an unusual way?