

SERMON: PSALM 23

Today I want to close our series on the Psalms with the most well known psalm of all – Psalm 23.

Many of you know this Psalm by heart.

The trouble is that we may know this psalm by heart...but the point of knowing it by heart is to live it, right?

This is a psalm that doesn't take on full force unless we *live into it*. So I am going to ask, that as we go through this psalm, that you think to yourself...

How can I live into the reality of this psalm in my life...today.

Because it's only when these beliefs that we hold, drill down and funnel down into the center of our beings.

It's only when our beliefs drill down and funnel down into our hearts and come alive there that we actually change.

When we let psalm 23 drill down into us...it is a psalm that is a comfort – yes...but it can also be a change agent for us...that can transform the rhythm of our lives... So I'd like you to listen with this in mind today...

Now the first line of this psalm is...

1. The Lord Is My Shepherd I shall not want

What David is doing here is identifying with God, and putting God into his profession.

He is saying "If I am a shepherd...and I think I am doing a pretty good job...how awesome would it be to think about what God would be like if he was in my same profession."

David thinks about this...and then he writes...if "The Lord is my shepherd...that's about the best shepherd there can ever be...I will lack nothing!"

Or in more traditional terms, "**I shall not want**"

Why? Because *the Lord does exactly what I am doing, but does it perfectly for me...*

You get this intimacy between David and the Lord in this psalm don't you? A closeness that allows David to put God into his own shoes, and identify his profession with what God actually does for him.

Now shepherding is not something we are too familiar with today. There are no

shepherds herding sheep down Miller and Bollinger...

So I have asked Staci, Ken and Donna – some of our Session - to come up here...state their profession...we have a physician, a dentist and a lawyer...

And contemporize this psalm ...share with us for one minute the following:

The Lord is my physician...I shall not want – what does this mean for Staci?

The Lord is my dentist...I shall not want – what does this mean for Ken?

The Lord is my lawyer...I shall not want – what does this mean for Donna?

As they talk, think about your own area of expertise. Put the Lord in that area, working for you. What does that mean for you? Could you write a psalm, or a song about it?

(Staci, Ken & Donna share)

. 2. He Makes Me To Lie Down In Green Pastures; He leads me beside the still waters...

One great paraphrase in one translation of the first part of this couplet is **“He allows me to rest”**.

I can't think of anything more needed today than rest.

It is hard to get people in Silicon Valley to rest, just like it was very hard for the shepherd to get sheep in the herd feeling safe enough for them to lie down.

Sheep don't lie down!

They are skittish creatures, always up and vigilant, looking around, expecting danger.

We have a rescue dog like this. There she is.

Her name is Opie.

She is looks like she is part German Shepherd and part Chihuahua.

Strange mix, but she is cute...

However...she is

Constantly on the move...jumping here and there...freaking out...hyper! Why?

Opie is a rescue dog and she always thinks something bad is going to happen to her.

She wandered the streets alone for a long time...skinny as a rail when the humane league picked her up and my daughter Julie and I happened to be there when she came in. We got her for Julie.

Such a smart little dog.

But she is always afraid that something bad is going to happen and she can't stand it when we leave her alone.

She gets very calm though when Julie my daughter is home. She knows that Julie is her person, and she relaxes...she feels safe.

The part about leading me beside the still waters is more than just creating a pretty word image – **It is a statement of safety.**

If the waters were rushing waters, if the sheep fell in, their heavy wool would drag them down to the bottom and they would drown.

Leading by still waters is a statement of the shepherd watching out for the sheep's safety and welfare.

Just like Opie, sheep are a breed that are difficult animals to calm down. They had to have deep trust in their shepherd, as Opie does for Julie.
That's when Opie truly rests. When she knows Julie is home...

Now maybe its always been hard to get the human race to settle down to rest...maybe its not just Silicon Valley.

Maybe that's why God instituted, as a command, in the beginning, a day of rest.

Honor the Sabbath day and keep it Holy. No work was to be done on the Sabbath.

We don't observe a day of rest anymore in our culture (Ocean Grove)...businesses are open 7 days a week and we just keep going like the ever-ready bunny – from day to day.

But the concerning thing is, that we we were created in such a way that *we need* to observe at least one day of rest a week.

So many of our illnesses and issues today are due to stress. We are a stressed out nation folks...

Part of observing a day of rest, is not just so that we get our beauty sleep. It speaks to a whole rhythm of life and outlook.

Observing a day of rest acknowledges that we are not God. The world will go on without us. Leave the world and all the responsibilities in God's hands just for a day. Let it go. And rest! Lie down in green pastures...

Observing a day of rest acknowledges that we are free!

Second, the reason God initiated a day of rest, was to declare that his people – the Hebrew people who had been slaves under Pharaoh working 7 days a week...were now free.

The Lord had set them free, using Moses to lead them out of bondage and they could now rest! Slaves don't rest. Free people do!

In other words, observing a day of rest means that you are a slave to no one – not to any job, not to any expectation, not to any person.

In Christ you are free.

The command to "Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy – to rest - is a command that only free people can observe..."

Slaves to no one...but to Christ...who sets us free...

Take the rest you need. Lie down in green pastures. Stroll beside the still waters.

Why?

Because the Lord is your shepherd...

3. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name sake

Lets talk about sheep for a minute. Sheep are not that bright. They have a real low IQ

Guess who Jesus compares people to all through the NT?

Sheep...kind of humbling...Maybe a little off-putting...

Still...its in the Bible

Sheep don't get it...when it comes to figuring out Gods plan, Like sheep...we don't have a clue...

And sheep are notorious for going on the same rutted paths over and over again..

And they keep going on them, even when they've eaten up the pasturelands and the ground is dry and desert-like

The point???

We need a leader...we need to follow someone who cares about us and knows where we are going

The Lord is our shepherd...and he does this leading for us...why?

For his name sake...

What are some of the names for God in Hebrew?

They are Provider...Rescuer...Deliverer...God of Strength

It is God's nature to care for us in these ways, and care for us well

Trust in his NAME...

4. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

Last Monday we observed an eclipse. (Image)
How many of you went up to see it...anyone?
It was a phenomenal event – a once in a lifetime moment.

Yet at the same time that it was spectacular, I have heard people say that there was something eerie about it too as the sun was blotted out for a few moments of time and the moons shadow covered it up....

I was at the ranch at 10am on that Monday, and the horses went a little nuts for half an hour.
Pawing the ground, whinnying, bucking up...

The wind kicked up and it grew a bit darker;
It felt good when the sun came out again in full force and warmed us all
And things got back to “normal” – you could feel it!

This part of the psalm tells us that no matter how dark it gets, no matter what kind of shadows we experience in our lives, no matter how eerie or unsettling things may be...we do not need to be afraid.
We are not alone

ANOTHER LESS THAN COMPLIMENTARY THING ABOUT SHEEP IS THAT THEY ARE THIN-SKINNED CREATURES

WE AREN'T THAT TOUGH AGAINST LIFES UNPREDICTABILITIES

EVERY SHEPHERD KNEW, IN BIBLICAL TIMES, THAT VALLEYS IN ADDITION TO HARBORING PREDATORS... WERE ALSO SUBJECT TO SUDDEN STORMS, AND FLASH FLOODS THAT SENT WALLS OF WATER RAMPAGING DOWN THE SLOPES... IF SHEEP BECAME SOAKED AND CHILLED WITH A FREEZING RAIN THE EXPOSURE Could KILL THEM IN A VERY SHORT TIME...

AND YET VALLEYS WERE THE VERY BEST WAY TO THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN EVERY SHEPHERD KNEW IT – THE SIDES OF THE MOUNTAINS WERE RUTTED AND STEEP...YOU COULDN'T GET UP TO THE HIGHER PLACES THAT WAY...

SHEPHERDS WERE WILLING TO RISK THE DARKNESS OF THE VALLEY TO GET THEIR SHEEP TO A BETTER PLACE

FOR THE JOY OF THE MOUNTAIN TOP EXPERIENCE THAT AWAITED THEM

SUFFERING, YOU'VE HEARD ME SAY IS OFTEN THE PLACE OF TRANSFORMATION...WE LEARN TO DEPEND IN THE VALLEY...WE LEARN COURAGE AND TRUST...AND WE LEARN ABOUT HOLDING GODS HAND IN THE DARK

ONE OF THE FUN EXERCISES I DID WITH YOUTH, WHEN I DID YOUTH MINISTRY WAS ONE WHERE YOU BLINDFOLD SOMEONE, AND THEY HAVE TO ALLOW ANOTHER PERSON TO LEAD THEM AROUND A SERIES OF OBSTACLES....IT WAS ACTUALLY A RACE....

THE PERSON WHO COULDN'T SEE ANYTHING ABSOLUTELY HAD TO SURRENDER, AND TRUST THEIR LEADER IF THEY WERE AFRAID THEY DIDN'T MOVE, THEY BECAME IMMOBILIZED....AND THEY LOST THE RACE...

NOTICE ONE WORD HERE IN THIS PORTION OF THE PSALM...THE WORD IS **"THROUGH"**

IT DOESN'T SAY "EVEN THOUGH I AM STUCK IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW" ...NO...
THERE IS A PROMISE HERE THAT **WHEN WE DARE TO BE LED BY JESUS IN TOUGH TIMES WE WILL BE LED OUT OF THE DARKNESS**
YES...BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE
NO...LIFE IS NOT FAIR

Many of you have lost loved ones.

There is a deep sadness to that, like a shadow, that stays with us after someone dies. We might not know why this has happened, or understand how God's timing works, or what the point is...

Life is not fair, and we can't explain it all. As Christians we embrace the mystery that God still allows evil in this world – while asserting at the same time that ...

GOD IS FAITHFUL IN THE DARK AND WILL Eventually LEAD US OUT

THE Psalm then SAYS, **"I WILL NOT FEAR....WHY?.... FOR YOU ARE WITH ME"**

I CAN GO THROUGH ANYTHING, SOMEONE TOLD ME ONCE, AS LONG AS I KNOW I AM NOT ALONE...

Someone told me that the phrase “**I am with you**” from the mouth of God to people, **occurs 365 times in the scripture** - one for every day of the year...because we need to keep being reminded of it...over and over again.

4. Your rod and your staff they comfort me

Here is a rod. Here is a staff.

THE ROD WAS USED TO GENTLY TOUCH THE BACK OF THE SHEEP TO KEEP THEM ON THE PATH IF THEY STARTED TO WANDER OFF...also used to separate the sheep's wool and make sure there were no wounds or parasites

AND THE STAFF HAD THE CROOK IN IT AT THE TOP THAT WAS USED TO REACH DOWN INTO A RAVINE, HOOK A SHEEP, AND LIFT HIM UP....

BACK THEN THE ROD AND STAFF WERE THE EMERGENCY MEDICAL TEAM – the EMT's...

The staff was also used for the shepherds to draw sheep close to each other, and to himself
THE COMFORT IS THIS...THAT EVEN WHEN I FEEL LOST, ALONE, OR WHEN I START TO GET OFF TRACK...I KNOW THAT YOUR ROD AND YOUR STAFF
WILL BE THERE
TO KEEP ME CLOSE TO YOU – lead me, guide me, pull me out of tough places

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

SHEPHERDS WOULD ALWAYS GO UP TO THE TABLELANDS - THE FLAT AREAS ON TOP OF THE MTN. and prepare the SUMMER ground for their sheep ahead of time...

IN THE SPRING...THEY WOULD pull out poisonous weeds, open up rocks that hid water sources, fill up dangerous holes...prepare the ground so that the sheep could feast and be satisfied....it took hours to do this...hard labor...

BUT...WHEN THE SHEEP ARRIVED
THEY WERE ABLE TO FEAST AND DRINK FREELY
EVERYTHING HAS BEEN PREPARED AHEAD OF TIME

There are many places in scripture where we read that God goes ahead of us...to prepare.

Perhaps the most famous one is when Jesus says to his disciples – speaking of heaven

“I go to prepare a place for you.”

Don't you love it when things are all prepared ahead of time for you? When someone has gone ahead and done all the cleaning, and organizing and you can just arrive and enjoy?

I love hotels for that reason.

I like walking into a hotel room and recognizing that someone has been there ahead of me to prepare the room so that I can be there and not worry whether or not the bed is made, the shower is clean, the heater works, the lights go on.

It is all prepared. Think about the role of God in this though for David...

In saying that the Lord prepares a table for him, he makes God out to be not just the host, but the actual one who waits the tables .

The Lord is his table preparer...the one who serves...who makes everything ready.

In addition, though, this all happens “in the presence of my enemies”

Which once again exalts the power and majesty of God as trustworthy protector and deliverer.

So right here, in this line we have the two sides of God magnificently intertwined

God as servant – the one who prepares for us

God as all powerful - to protect us from our enemies

Finally, anointing the head of sheep with oil for the shepherd, , was a healing act that washed out wounds and parasites...that soothed and comforted.

Anointing was also done in ancient Israel as a sign that someone had a special purpose before God – prophets, kings and queens were anointed. Anointing was a symbol of honor.

That is why David says “my cup overflows”. Being set apart for a special purpose, being anointed and honored by God himself
Is cause for rejoicing...

Not only are we tended and cared for and healed

We are honored and set apart for a purpose and call...by God himself

And all this happens in the presence of our enemies who cannot thwart God's plan for us...

The ending of this psalm does something very unique...

It creates a new image

Up until this point it has been me following the Lord

Now...something follows me...

6. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...

All of a sudden, something follows me...as I follow the Lord

What is it?

Goodness & mercy

What follows me, as I choose to follow the Lord, is a legacy that affects those who come after me

My children and my children's children

Following the Lord, in this way

Learning to trust, remembering my purpose, taking time to rest and believe in God's goodness – getting into that rhythm of life

Affects those who come after me...

They too will experience his goodness and mercy...from generation to generation....

That cup overflowing in the verse just before spills out and affects everyone else with goodness and mercy...coming after...

7. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!!

This is David's final victorious declaration

It reminds me of another psalm David wrote that said

One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. Psalm 27:4

All that David wanted – his hearts desire - was to be with the Lord – in his dwelling place

I have had many desires in my life...and have pursued many avenues.

Yet David was single minded in his desire to be with the Lord. He always came back to the reality that....

Being with God fulfills every longing

Satisfies every need

Lifts us up, restores our soul

Brings us deep Shalom and rest...

My challenge to you is to meditate on each of these segments of Psalm 23 – one per day this week

Did you notice I split it into 7 sections?

One for each day...so you can begin to LIVE INTO IT

Let the rhythm of this psalm and David's desire for God sink deep into your own soul...

Allow the words to filter into your being and catch the rhythm of life that this psalm sings out... that your cup might overflow....

Let's say it one more time together....

(Put The Lord is my Shepherd, ESV on screens)
Let us Pray