

Life without Lack: Peace for Jumpy Sheep

Scripture: Psalm 23 Deut 8:1-10

Good morning! Boy—am I glad to be worshipping with you this morning! I really need this time together today to focus on God. A friend of mine posted on Facebook Thursday—well 2021, we had a solid 5 days—here’s to 2022! Friends, this week has been unprecedented. As we gather to worship, let’s stop and remind ourselves of who our rock is. Of who our shepherd is. Because of Jesus we can live with confidence, and even have peace in times like these.

We are in a series called Life Without Lack, inspired by the 23rd Psalm. A life lacking nothing—full and at peace—that is a life that God offers to YOU, to everyone. This is not just for spiritual superstars. Life to the fullest is the way we were made to live. But the reality is that all of us see the ways we don’t experience that life without lack. What is wrong? That is our topic today. We will look at Psalm 23’s promise of rest, the reality of unrest, and the path to peace with Jesus. The promise of rest, the reality of unrest, and the path we can take to peace. What a timely reminder!

Psalm 23 is an amazing resource for us. I hope you read it, pray it, and talk about it with your friends. Most of all, I hope you memorize it! This Psalm gives us the promises from God that we need to live our lives today. It tells us that God is the good shepherd who will take care of us sheep—even when we get lost. And life with that shepherd is full—it is life without lack. The psalm says that the shepherd makes us lie down in green pastures. This often sounded to me like somehow the shepherd was forcing the sheep to lie down. That is not what the text is about—the shepherd makes it *possible* for the sheep to lie down in green pastures. Our Immerse Bibles translate it “he lets me rest in green meadows.” The Message says “you’ve bedded me down in lush meadows.” Those translations convey the right idea—the shepherd is the one who gets us to green pastures, and then he also creates the conditions for us to rest.

Phillip Keller, a shepherd who wrote about this psalm, says that sheep will not lie down if they are hungry. They will keep on looking for more food. They also need to be free from pests, free from conflict with other sheep, and most of all free from fear. When you see sheep

lying down and resting, that is a happy sheep—full, relaxed, able to ruminate and digest food. The Psalm is saying that the Good Shepherd will create the circumstances where we can be THAT kind of sheep—satisfied, contented, at peace.

The psalm goes on to spell out more of this promised life—not only plenty of food and water to enjoy in peace, but it says that the shepherd restores my soul. That word translated soul means our innermost being—our life, our strength, our core. It is also the place where our emotions and desires come from. So when the shepherd provides for us so that we can rest and reflect—our emotions can calm down and center on him. I don't know about you but I could use some refreshing and restoring of my soul this week! This promise of peace in my innermost self sounds great! But have you looked at the news!?! Is that realistic?

Before we turn to the reality of unrest, let's look at one example of how God provides for his people. Our second reading was from Deuteronomy, telling us about God's promises to the people of Israel. Here they were FINALLY about to enter the promised land. Think about their situation. They had been living in the wilderness for 40 years! 40 years! They had been surviving on manna—the miraculous provision of God every day. They all were wearing 40 year old clothes and shoes. They were the definition of a rag tag bunch. There they were, about to cross the Jordan into the land flowing with milk and honey that God had promised them.

How would you have felt if you were part of that group? They were poised to invade a country with fortified towns, defended by big, strong people. Really? After all this time camping out in the desert, NOW we have to *conquer* this country? I might feel like that sounds too hard. God promises that it is a good land where nothing is lacking-- full of water, full of good crops, and honey and olive oil.

But it is scary! How could they possibly invade like this? With families and kids and everything they owned and suddenly they are supposed to be a successful army? These Israelites needed faith! They needed to trust God so they could receive that life without lack that He promised! God knew that, so he reminded them through Moses. "Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years." He fed you, your clothes did not wear out, your feet didn't swell—he took care of you! God's people were on the edge of the Promised Land, and they needed to remember all that God had *already* done for them.

He had been with them all the way, he led them, and he provided for them. If God did all of that in the wilderness, he could do that in the land of Canaan too.

Do you see? Our worries and fear come out of our trying to do things by our own strength. Our hope and our peace come from trusting the One who leads us and provides for us. That is just as true for us today as it was then. It is still hard for us to step out in faith, but that is the path to God's promised rest and fullness.

We so often find ourselves in times of conflict or uncertainty. Can we trust our shepherd then? We often don't feel at ALL like sheep peacefully lying down in the midst of plenty. The reality of unrest can overwhelm us, can't it? I mentioned earlier that in order to lie down sheep needed to be free from fear. It doesn't take much to spook the sheep and get them all up and running. Keller tells the story of one time some friends came up to visit him from the city. They had a tiny Pekingese dog with them. They pulled up, opened the car door, and the dog jumped out. Just a glimpse of that tiny pup was enough to send 200 sheep up and running across the pasture. Unrest is real and it happens easily for jumpy sheep.

I don't know about you, but I've been a pretty jumpy sheep this week. Very jumpy. I have not felt that peace and relaxation of resting under the care of my shepherd. I was jumpy before the rioters stormed our Capitol and it only got worse seeing that invasion. Even just thinking about it now I am feeling tense and anxious. So, what do we do in the face of the reality of unrest?

Last week we talked about the difference the good shepherd makes. What shepherd you follow can make a HUGE difference in your quality of life. This week I think many of us have had some of our true shepherds revealed. Who are you following? Who do you look to for guidance? Who do you trust to protect you? That is your shepherd. Who are you treating as your shepherd? The reality is that we are sheep—we are not qualified to be a shepherd. So if we really mostly trust ourselves, we are in trouble. If we put our faith in our stuff, our guns, our bank account, whatever—those quickly prove to be worthless in giving us rest. Often they just make us more anxious. Other people can't do the job either. Having an unqualified shepherd leads us to trouble.

Friends—NONE of our fellow humans are qualified to be good shepherds for us. They are just sheep too! The word Pastor means shepherd, but even people in my role can only act as sub-shepherds, and ONLY to the extent we are closely following the real shepherd, the Good Shepherd. But when we put our ultimate trust in political leaders, or in talking heads on TV, or even in human institutions—they will all eventually let us down. None of them really can deliver the life without lack that Jesus offers us.

Unrest is real. It invades our lives often. We are jumpy sheep. The question is how do we cope with it? I have good news to share about that! Let me share what my week has been like. On Thursday night I found myself lying awake in bed, again. Many different thoughts, images, issues were cycling through my head. Most of all I felt tense, anxious, wound up. Then I remembered the video Pastor Chris posted this week. I hope you all will check out this short video she did on identifying our emotions. You can find it on the *Staying Well in a Pandemic* page on our website. She shared a wheel of emotions and talked about the value of naming our feelings. As I lay in bed, I realized that I was feeling angry. And scared. But most of all I was feeling sad. Sad. I was disappointed, confused, and anxious about what might be next. As I recognized and named the emotions, I started to feel a little better. I was able to take some slow, deep breaths and start to relax a bit. The free-floating anxiousness was turning into something I could identify and cope with. So thank you Pastor Chris for giving us this valuable tool! I hope all of you will check it out.

But identifying the emotions is just the beginning, not the end, of the process of coming to grips with reality of unrest in our lives. The shepherd Phillip Keller noticed something very surprising about his spooked sheep. He saw that nothing quieted and reassured his sheep like seeing him in the field with them. The presence of their shepherd put them at ease like nothing else could. That is equally true for us jumpy sheep too. There is no substitute for our keen awareness that our Shepherd is nearby. What can blunt the fear and sadness and panic of this world? Remembering that our Shepherd is with us. He is in control, and we are not. We can trust him to lead us and to provide for us, just like he always has. That was the leap of faith that the people had to make as they prepared to cross the Jordan into the promised land. They

had to decide to trust that God, their loving shepherd, was with them, would continue to provide for them, and would continue to lead them.

When you are overwhelmed and stressed out—turn your eyes to the Good Shepherd. Actively put your trust in Him, practice following HIM—not yourself, not your favorite news channel or party or even pastor. Jesus is the ONE who can help, he is the one who can give us rest for our souls—that deep down, profound peace that we yearn for and are missing so much right now. You can practice this. You can pray each night—"now I lay me down in peace and sleep, for you, O God, keep me safe." When you are feeling overwhelmed, you can intentionally turn your attention back to Jesus and ask for his help. It wasn't until Friday morning that I remembered to do this myself. I had gotten a decent night's sleep after identifying my emotions but was still pretty frazzled. Then I remembered where our help comes from. It doesn't come from your favorite paper or your preferred media shouter. It doesn't come from the stock market going up, or even a promotion at work. It comes from the LORD. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. Enjoy the peace that comes from being with your Shepherd. I was reminded this week that we can always turn to Jesus and say HELP! When things are too much, when you can't handle it anymore—call out for help!

The first place to ask is Jesus. Lord—help me! Lead me through this mess! Help me feel your presence with me in this dark valley. Jesus is not far off. He is with you. He is already involved in the mess you are struggling with. When I finally prayed for Jesus to help and give me peace—I was surprised to realize that my tension was easing. But it isn't a magic trick. We need to turn again and again back to Jesus. Friends, we don't have to go it alone. We were never meant to. Jesus, our Good Shepherd is with you and will help. Just turn to him.

Jesus also shows up to us in other ways. We often see God's love through our friends, our family, in counselors and mental health professionals. All of those are people Jesus can use to help you lie down in green pastures again. Before all the craziness in Washington I was already a jumpy sheep this week. One of the reasons was the weight of some decisions I was wrestling with. Even though I was easily distracted from the reality of Jesus' presence with me, he kept on showing up. My wife reminded me that I was not making the decision alone and encouraged me to pray. Pastor Chris and the session were great colleagues and encouragers,

and sources of wisdom. They all were Jesus with skin on for me. I am so grateful for you all! God puts us in relationships, in community, and supports us through whatever this broken world throws at us. Even when we are in the darkest valley, Jesus is with us and can comfort us. Sometimes you are the way Jesus comforts another person their dark time! What a privilege!

Our shepherd is always available to us. The question for us is whether we pay attention. We need to turn away from all of those other would be shepherds--those unqualified fakers who leave us with our stomachs churning, lying in bed staring at the ceiling. We need to remember who we are—sheep! And WHOSE we are—we belong to the Good Shepherd. And remember his promises—a life without lack as we live in his presence. When things get tough, go back to verse one of Psalm 23—the Lord is MY shepherd, I lack for nothing! Pray for his presence with you, his peace surrounding you, and his provision always. When we find ourselves in scary situations, that does not mean that Jesus has abandoned us. It is time for us to call out to Him for help! Jesus is always searching and seeking to find us and welcome us back. He is always with us.

Friends—we will always face times like this week. But when we keep our eyes on Jesus, we can always find peace. Spend time with him instead of your news feed. What if we focused more on Jesus than we did on the things that trouble us? Jesus is the place of rest, of contentment, of safety, of peace. You can always call out—help Jesus, I can't cope—please take over! He will be with you—often in ways you weren't expecting. The contentment of resting in green pastures and a restored soul is waiting for each of us.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—thank you for being our Good Shepherd. Help us to remember to turn to you always. Teach us to rest in your presence, even in the middle of the storm. Give us your strength and your guidance through it all. Help us to be ambassadors of your peace and your love to the people around us, especially when peace and love are hard to find.

In your name we ask it, Amen!

God is the giver of every perfect gift. He is trustworthy. He is our Good Shepherd. This week may you keep your eyes on Jesus and let his peace and love flood your life and flow out to our neighbors!