

Life without Lack: The Good Shepherd Makes All the Difference

Scripture: Psalm 23, Phil 4:8-13

Good morning! Happy New Year! I don't think I've ever been so glad to get finished with a year as 2020! I am wondering if you have any New Years' Resolutions as we step into this fresh 12 months. I admit, I struggle with resolutions. My history with resolutions is reflected in this saying—may all your troubles last as long as your New Year's Resolutions!

I saw some people's resolutions for this year--- One senior citizen resolved to learn to play video games—that way he could bond more with his grandkids! Another person resolved to eat dessert first! Life is short! Someone else resolved to communicate exclusively in memes—I think quarantine got to them! The effects of isolating during the pandemic is showing up in resolutions—there are many about losing weight—one guy resolved to start smoking so he could lose weight! Another decided to live on the moon so he'd weigh less. I'm not sure these folks are really getting the point!

I do have a resolution that I think we all should try—let's get real. Let's all get real, get honest with ourselves. In particular, I think we should get real about what *we* are like, what *God* is like, and how *God cares* for us. What *we* are like, what *God* is like, and how *he* cares for us. Today we are starting a new sermon series called Life Without Lack. Life Without Lack. This was inspired by a little book by the philosopher Dallas Willard which I read a year or two ago. I was so excited, I told Alice that I wanted to preach a series on the 23rd Psalm. She said, NO! Not the death psalm! The 23rd Psalm is very well known, but sadly many of us have the same association as Alice—we often hear it at funerals, so it seems like it is all about death.

Actually, we have that exactly backwards—it is all about LIFE. The 23rd psalm is an amazing description of the life God intends for us. He provides what we need—food, water, safety. He is present with us. He comforts us. He goes with us through hard times. The valley of the shadow part is about how God is with us through EVERYthing, even the scary parts. We don't have to be afraid. God will always provide for us. What this psalm really describes is life

without lack, the life to the full that God wants us to have. I hope that you will take a little time over the next couple of weeks to memorize this psalm. If you already know the Old King James version of it by heart, memorize another translation too and see what you notice. It is only 6 verses long—we all can do this! Willard starts his book by pointing out that what Christians need most is to *really* see and *really* believe the things that they SAY they see and believe. We need to get real. We say that the Lord is our shepherd, but do we really believe it? Do we live like it?

The first verse of the 23rd psalm tells us exactly what we need to know about ourselves, about God, and about his provision for us. This one short verse helps us keep our resolution to be honest with ourselves—if we *really* believe it. The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing. The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

What does that say about us? Nothing directly, but it implies that we are sheep, right? Who needs a shepherd? Sheep! There are lots of other places in the Bible where this image of God as the Shepherd and his people as his sheep is spelled out. In fact, our invitation to worship today, Psalm 95, calls us the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. In Isaiah we are told that all of us, like sheep, have gone astray.

Friends, being called a sheep is not really a compliment. Phillip Keller is a shepherd who wrote a wonderful little book about the 23rd Psalm. He says that sheep require more attention and care than any other kind of livestock. Keller calls out several parallels between us and sheep—“our mass mind (or mob instincts), our fears and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, our perverse habits.” Ouch! Can you see how that list describes people? Just look at the headlines in the news. Or read a few chapters in the Bible. Or think back over the last week or last month of your life—honestly! I am so quick to be like that! All we like sheep really have gone astray! Keller tells about one ewe in his flock who would always weasel her way into the next field—she’d always find the hole in the fence or the place along the shore at low tide where the fence stopped and go into the other field. But usually the other field was worse! She left fresh, green grass for brown, picked over weeds. That is a pretty good picture of how our lives look when we run away from our shepherd! We struggle and strive and end up in a bad place needing help!

So first let's be honest about ourselves—we are not really that great at running the show. When left to our own devices we end up in a mess and need rescue—over and over! We are sheep. The second part of our resolution is to be honest about God. What is God really like? Many of us carry around an image of an angry, vengeful god. Someone just looking for a chance to bring the hammer down. That isn't the God we see in the Bible, in Jesus, or in the 23rd Psalm. They all show us that God is the good shepherd. Psalm 23 describes how the Lord is our shepherd—he brings to places with plenty of food and water, he guides us, he is with us when things get scary, he comforts us. His goodness and love pursue us always. Even when we obstinately squeeze through the fence to go eat the thistles and stickers, he tracks us down and calls us home.

The Good Shepherd's care for us is summed up in that first verse—we lack nothing. We lack nothing! We all live in a world where we are bombarded with messages that we won't be happy UNTIL we get just a few more things—a new phone, a new car, a new look, a promotion, a new line of credit. Every ad tells us that we all lack . . . something. If only we'd buy their thing, then maybe we'd be ok. At least until the new model comes out.

What would it be like to lack nothing? To be satisfied. To be content. Can you imagine? That is what our shepherd offers us. Now this is not about getting every shiny gadget you can dream of—it is deeper than that. It is about *real* satisfaction in life. The life without lack isn't defined by our stuff. It is about relationships. Especially our relationship with the shepherd. Money and things don't buy happiness. If you are poor enough, some additional money helps a LOT, but pretty quickly more money stops translating into more happiness. The curve flattens out. In fact, happiness actually starts to go down eventually! More Money, More Problems! Money and things cannot fill the vacuum of loneliness, they can't create meaningful relationships with people. They can't give us laughter or joy or love or meaning or purpose.

We can all look around and see plenty of joyless people held in the iron grip of the wrong master, as Keller says. If you commit to the god of career or stuff or reputation; you end up a prisoner. The Good Shepherd sets you free. Keller tells about a neighboring shepherd he knew. This neighbor didn't care about his sheep and didn't take care of them or their fields. He just left them to fend for themselves. They soon were sickly and underfed. They'd line up in

their overgrazed, picked over fields and look through the fence at the green fields Keller prepared for his flock. That image shows you the difference the right shepherd makes. Would you rather be lying down in the green pasture, or stretching your neck through the barbed wire, wishing for some fresh grass? Committing to the right shepherd makes all the difference!

Over Christmas Alice and I stumbled onto the Patrick Stewart version of the Christmas Carol. It is great. Scrooge—before the ghosts' visits—is a wonderful example of a person who has followed the wrong master. His greed has taken everything that matters from him. He is sad, bitter and alone. But look at poor Bob Cratchit and his family. Even though they are poor and Tiny Tim is sick and dying—they are happy. There is love and grace and joy around their table. They are living a life without lack, even though times are hard.

All through the Bible we see that following God is no guarantee of an easy life. David—the author of Psalm 23—was repeatedly attacked unjustly by King Saul, forced to run off and hide in the desert, to live in caves. He even had to live with his enemies for awhile and pretend to be crazy so they wouldn't kill him! By the world's standards it is easy to say that David often lacked plenty! It is same with Moses, Elijah, Paul, Peter—all through the Bible people following God often went through times of suffering, pain and want. Even Jesus himself, our great Good Shepherd, suffered the very worst that people could dish out—all for our sakes. But Jesus told us to take heart, to not grow discouraged in hard times, because he has overcome the world! Our shepherd has won the battle and will care for us!

When the 23rd Psalm says that we lack nothing, it doesn't mean our physical circumstances. Obviously, everyone lacks some things some of the time! But when we have the right shepherd things our deepest needs will be filled. Who is your shepherd? Who are you trusting to guide you? We all learn, over and over, that our bad shepherds of greed and pride and selfishness do not deliver in the long run. They leave us empty inside, staring hungrily through the fence from their dusty, overgrazed field. But when you are committed to the Good Shepherd, when you live as a sheep of HIS flock—THEN you can live in his lush, green pasture, lie down by that still water and experience the life without lack that really matters. When Jesus is your shepherd, you are cared for and guided by your loving, self-giving Master. Then, even

when times are hard, even when the storm is raging, even when it feels like we can never catch a break—even then we can still live secure and content in the care of the Good Shepherd.

The apostle Paul gives us a great example of what this life without lack, this life of contentment looks like, even in the face of hard times. In our second reading he is thanking the church in Philippi for their concern for him. Paul says I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

The secret to being content in all circumstances? What does that sound like to you? Life without lack! Paul's relationship with Jesus overcomes his external circumstances. Just before these verses he reminds us "the Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything but in every situation, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God. And the peace of God will guard your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus." When we put our trust in God, when we ask him for what we need instead of anxiously wringing our hands about it, he will give us . . . peace. The promise isn't that we will get everything we ask for. The promise is that God's peace will guard our hearts. We'll be content. We'll lack for nothing because God is with us.

I heard a guy talking on a podcast recently. He was telling about a time in his life when things were hard for him. He had lost his job. He was not finding a new job as fast as he'd hoped. He had a wife and young kids who he was supposed to be supporting. And he was out of money. Specifically, he remembered a day when he literally did not have enough money to buy a Snickers bar. He was really down. What a failure—he can't even buy a candy bar, let alone take care of his family! As he stewed about his situation, he felt a nudge from the Holy Spirit. God was telling him to walk around and give thanks for everything that he DID have. So he stood up and started looking around the room, thanking God for the things he saw. Then he walked around their home, noticing thing after thing that God had provided for them. After about 20 minutes, he said he was a different person. He was still unemployed. He still didn't have money for a Snickers bar. But he had a new perspective. He had the peace of God. He was starting to step into the life without lack that our Good Shepherd offers us.

Do you see? Gratitude is the door into that place of contentment and joy that God wants for you. Start with what we've already received, rather than what we don't yet see. When we begin with recognizing what God has ALREADY done for us, we can trust him to carry us through the hard times, even if it feels like the valley of the shadow of death.

So—for our new year's resolution: Let's be honest with ourselves. Let's be real, first about who we are—lost sheep who need help. We can't fix our problems, we need rescue. Second, let's be real about who God is—he is the GOOD shepherd—he's not evil, not self serving, not uncaring. He is good and generous and loving. He is the one who lays down his life for us. He never stops working to save us. And finally let's be honest about what the Good Shepherd does for us—he gives us what is most important—Himself. He takes care of us. We can trust him, he will provide for us and keep us safe, now and always. You don't have to live a life of anxious clawing and grasping, even in these anxious times. The shepherd is waiting to care for you, so you can live a life of abundant joy, regardless of your circumstances.

In 2021, let's return to the care of our good Shepherd. Let's pray: Lord Jesus—thank you for coming to save us from all the places we get lost and hurt and stuck. Thank you for patiently bringing us back to you again and again. Help us to truly believe that you are our good shepherd. To believe that you are actively involved in our lives right now for our good. To believe that with you is true contentment and life without lack. Help us to enter into your sheepfold and never stray away again. In your name we ask it, Amen!

Invitation to Lord's Supper

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
the gospel tells us that God, by the leading of a star,
revealed the Savior to the peoples of the earth,
and, by the power that enabled Christ
to change water into wine, he made known his glory to the disciples.
God sets a table for us in whatever wildernesses we find ourselves in. Our good shepherd is
always with us and always provides for us.

Come then to the joyful feast of the Lord and be transformed.

The Great Thanksgiving

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise

With Joy we praise you, gracious God. You made us and everything in all creation. Yet you chose to keep your promises to us, despite all our faults. Thank you for Jesus, our Good Shepherd who is the light of the world and shows us the way. So we join with all of creation to proclaim your glory:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

Thank you for sending us Jesus, who laid down his life for us, the sheep of his hand. Be with us as we remember how Jesus gave himself for us. . . .

Great is the mystery of faith:

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Lord we pray that you pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of the bread and cup that we share in all the places we are. May they be for us the communion of the body and blood of Christ. By your Spirit make us one in Christ, united in ministry in every place, and help us to grow up in all things into Christ our Lord.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray: **Our Father . . .**

Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Prayer after Communion

Loving God, we thank you that you have fed us in this Sacrament, united us with Christ, and given us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in your eternal kingdom. Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Benediction

Friends—we truly are lost, bull headed, silly sheep. But we have a good shepherd who cares for us, who provides for us, who tracks us down to rescue us, who is crazy about each one of you! Jesus, that good shepherd, will always provide what you really need most. As you believe and trust that truth this week, may the light of the glorious gospel of Christ shine in our hearts, transform our lives, and brighten the world.

And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon you always. Amen!