

# Psalm 23

## The Divine Shepherd

### A Psalm of David.

<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.<sup>[b]</sup>

He leads me in right paths<sup>[c]</sup>  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the darkest valley,<sup>[d]</sup>  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.

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

<sup>6</sup>Surely<sup>[e]</sup> goodness and mercy<sup>[f]</sup> shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.<sup>[g]</sup>

## Jesus the Good Shepherd

**10** "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

<sup>11</sup>"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup>For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes<sup>[a]</sup> it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

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**Psalm 23; John 10:1-18**

**Who Are You Going to Trust?**

**Kerra Becker English**

Who are you going to trust?

Will you trust the thief? Thieves and the bandits break in over the gate. Their intent is to take as much as they can from anyone they can. They know what doesn't belong to them. They don't care. They will destroy property and possessions on their way to getting what they want. They may even kill if it allows them to satisfy today's greed. They take bribes. They make dirty deals. They have no compassion for those they hurt along the way; the people on their path are mere obstacles to overcome on the never-ending hunt for more. Obviously – we know where Jesus stands on thieves and bandits. Don't trust them. Protect yourself. Be alert.

Who are you going to trust?

Will you trust the hired hand? The hired hand gets paid to watch the sheep. It might even be a good job. But Jesus makes it clear that there are limits to what the hired hand will do for the sheep. Even if the hired hand does the job well, when the wolf comes, and it's them or the sheep, you know who they are picking. The hired hand may not be quite as nasty as the thief, and yet, this is the person who's only looking out for number one. They don't get paid enough, encouraged enough, or rewarded enough to give their life for some old sheep. When their shift is over – the sheep no longer matter. It's all about the paycheck. So, Jesus is reminding us to be suspicious when there's money involved. The hired hand may be trustworthy – sometimes – when all is going well. But she or he might not be so ready to tangle with the predators if the

sheep need protection or act with courage if the sheep get into danger. Even with the hired hand, the sheep are still at risk, so be cautious.

Who are you going to trust?

Will you trust the stranger? Well, with strangers we can't always tell if they are trustworthy. They may be, they may not be. That's the difficulty isn't it? That's why we tell children not to talk to strangers. We know that some strangers may do them harm, and we want to do our best to protect them from that. But that's a pretty small slice of the population. Those same children are required at school to meet new teachers. They are encouraged to make new friends. They ride buses and live in neighborhoods and go places - mostly with adult supervision – but sometimes adult attention goes elsewhere. Over time, they have to learn WHICH strangers are trustworthy and which ones might not be, a lesson we are sometimes still learning ourselves. But unfortunately, we have often relied on stereotypes for guidance. That neighborhood is sketchy. A poor person only wants your money. You can always trust a police officer if you need help. Find someone in a uniform. Stay away from men if you are alone, dark skinned men especially. Look at how she dresses. That lifestyle isn't natural. We lump people into categories, and those categories don't necessarily keep us safe, nor do they help us make wise judgments about who we can truly trust. Mostly they just reinforce the kind of prejudices that keep us from getting to know each other as the beloved sheep of Christ's wide and diverse flock, not realizing that he has multiple folds that might not look or act exactly like us.

In this passage, Jesus is metaphorically talking about our relationship with both God and neighbor as being able to discern the true voice of the stranger. Do the sheep recognize the

stranger's voice? If that stranger's voice seems off, you might not want to trust that person. Not everyone has the best interest of the sheep, or us, in mind. Instinctually, perhaps we aren't all that different from sheep. We can pay attention to someone's voice and body language and message and often detect those off tones or determine if someone is up to no good.

But if you hear the stranger's voice, and you seem known, loved, cared for, or recognized as valuable – the stranger may be someone who can help you. It's good to notice if the stranger has keys to the gate. Does the gate of your heart open or close near this person? Sometimes God can seem a stranger to us. God doesn't speak in the same manner as we do. And it's difficult to tell sometimes if God is for us or against us. And yet Jesus is trying to show us who God is in the shepherd, at the same time he's helping us see ourselves in the sheep.

Who are you going to trust?

Trust the good shepherd. And if we want to know how to do that, a good place to start is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, a prayer that was around a long time even before Jesus took on this metaphor to describe how God is with us in the living Christ. The Lord is my shepherd. My good shepherd. And the things that denote trustworthiness in that prayer are things to pay attention to today as well. With the Lord as my shepherd, my needs are met. I may not have everything I want – but I have enough. With the Lord as my shepherd, my soul is restored and renewed as I look at the green meadows around me, as I find clear streams for drinking water. With the Lord as my shepherd, I have the courage to navigate the dark places in my life. I can be surrounded by enemies and still know how much and how deeply I am loved. With the Lord as my shepherd, I know goodness; I

know mercy; I trust that I am not alone. I live in a house where I am safe, and where I belong, and I also know that will be true for my whole entire life.

Jesus expands on this prayer by saying just how far he is willing to go to demonstrate this trust to us. He says, “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” Too often we think of the cross as punishment, as atonement for our sin laid on Christ’s shoulders, a blood sacrifice, not that different from the sacrifice of sheep in the Old Testament. And while that theme has had staying power in the institutional church, it’s far from being the whole picture. The way that Jesus talks about laying down his life in John’s gospel speaks to something different, it tells me that Jesus is willing to confront the thieves, do better than hired hands, and fight off the wolves for us. The risk that he takes to show us God’s love is about having the courage to love the scruffy old sheep enough to fight to the death for them. Jesus fought to the death for us. He confronted the powers that lied, cheated, and stole from the people. He showed us that living a simple life would be enough, and would help others have enough as well. He taught that life was more than a paycheck, better than having riches, and he demanded as much. And in this text is one of my favorite verses. Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Jesus’ trustworthiness may come through his blood poured out for us, but it isn’t because we were some hateful sinners, it was because he was willing to confront the power of sin on our behalf. That’s a little bit different. When we see past sin and evil in this world, and can begin to imagine a trust-filled life, it does grow into something much greater than the constricted lives we sometimes count as all there can be. Life is meant to be full, abundant, amazing, and everlasting. Trust in that promise happens on the other side of the cross, in victory over the untrustworthiness that comes through in our world.

Who are you going to trust?

In today's world, this question is as relevant as ever. There are still plenty of wolves donning sheep's clothing and telling us they have our best interests in mind. There are thieves ready to take all they can, and a multitude of hired hands who are willing to look the other way so that their lifestyles won't have to change. Rather than rely on worn out stereotypes, we must open our ears to hear the voices clearly, so we will recognize those who belong in Christ's fold. We must learn who to trust and who to fight against. Hopefully, it won't be a path to the kind of cross Jesus had to bear, and yet he reminds us that those who follow him will take up their own crosses to do so. Being a trusting person in today's world is fraught with danger. The many who are drawn into antagonistic or apathetic relationships seems staggering. And setting our boundaries against those who are enamored with the world's power is an overwhelming task.

But Jesus reminds us that we have help. We have a shepherd on our side who is willing to die for the sheep. We have a shepherd who knows the pathway through the darkest valleys. We do not have to go this alone, not now, not ever. And there are other sheep, sometimes ones we don't even recognize at first, who are also part of this shepherd's flock. Stick together. Know who walks beside you and know who's there to guide you. This world isn't always safe for Christ's sheep, but in following Christ, you will know life, real life, in all its abundance. Amen.