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 Pathways Only (Youth Sunday)

The Lord is My Shepherd
Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;*^[a]

³ *he restores my soul.*^[b]
He leads me in right paths^[c]
for his name's sake.

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

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

⁶ *Surely*^[e] *goodness and mercy*^[f] *shall follow me
 all the days of my life,*
*and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 my whole life long.*^[g]

Close your eyes and listen again to the beginning of that passage.
 Listen for one word or phrase that jumps out at you.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Listen to it again, for what is God saying to me in this passage?

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

What we're doing is an ancient way
 of reading and studying the Bible, called ***Lectio Divina***.
 The key to it is reading the passage aloud multiple times,
 and listening for God's word to you.

There's something about hearing the Bible out loud that makes
More **powerful and meaningful**.
You can do this with any Bible passage—so try it at home sometime.

Psalm 23 is such a beloved and powerful Psalm.
That most of us have heard it **read aloud before**—
often at funerals, for its message of comfort.
Many of us have it memorized,
Even if it's a different Bible version—
and these words might come to mind when facing hard times.

Sometimes even people with dementia know this passage
when their memory fails in every other way.

These are **powerful words** from God, to us.
From God our Good Shepherd.
From Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

They are words of **hope, trust and reliance**.
They are a reminder that
we don't have to rely on ourselves—
we can and should **fully rely upon God**.

But that isn't easy, is it?
We want to rely on ourselves.
We want our own way.
We are proud and stubborn.
Sometimes it seems like we just don't get it,
When it comes to our relationship with God.

There's a reason God compares us to sheep!
Sheep are **not the sharpest crayons** in the box.
They truly rely upon the care, protection, and guidance of the shepherd.

For instance, sheep will **overgraze** a plot of land til there's nothing left—
until they are led to green pastures.

Sheep will **follow the herd**—if one jumps over a cliff, dozens may follow.

When a **pregnant** sheep goes into labor, she sits down.
And if she is facing downhill, she will stay in that direction, fighting against gravity to give birth...and if the shepherd does not help, she can die in that position instead of just turning around.

But perhaps the characteristic of sheep we can most identify with is being '**cast down**'.
Ever heard that in the Psalms? It's used multiple times.

It's like sheep who fall into a ditch or end up **on their backs**, and get stuck that way!
That's known as being '**cast down**'.
In Psalm 42, David says '*why are you cast down oh my soul?*'

To be cast down is to be **stuck**, crying, because you can't figure out how to get back up on your own!
A sheep can die this way within 24 hours!
A cast down sheep needs the shepherd to come and **turn** him over, **massage** his legs, and **hold** him until he calms down.

What does that image—of us and God—mean to you?
How do you identify with the sheep?
Do you realize how much we need the Shepherd?

We are called to **fully rely on God—not ourselves**.
We see only a little part of the picture, God made the picture.
We need someone bigger, stronger, completely reliable.

Max Lucado, in his book, *Traveling Light*, compares God to the **middle C** on the piano.
No matter what piano you play, Middle C is middle C.
It is unchanging.
It's steady, reliable, and helpful for your hands and ears, right?

Well, that's our God, and then some!

Our God is unchangeable.

Isn't that great?

Because EVERYTHING else in life changes—
relationships, health, weather...but not God.

God is ***completely reliable.***

No exceptions.

And God is ***all-powerful.***

Lucado says in *Traveling Light* that we don't need
a god on a shelf, in a box, or a genie in a bottle.

We need the Creator of the universe to help us!

He writes: *Counselors can comfort you in the storm, but you need a God who can still the storm. Friends can hold your hand at your deathbed, but you need a God who has defeated the grave. Philosophers can debate the meaning of life, but you need a Lord who can declare the meaning of life.*

Max Lucado, Traveling Light, Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 2001, pg. 15-6.

So if God, in Jesus Christ, is our Good Shepherd,

That means we have the Creator,

an unchanging, all-powerful loving and gracious God on our side!

What does it mean to you—that Jesus is YOUR Good Shepherd?

In Psalm 23, we see examples of the ways a shepherd cares for the sheep.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Shepherds make sure sheep have what they need

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

Sheep love to eat grass, and the shepherd finds those pastures for them.

he leads me beside still waters;

Sheep drown in running water so they need to be led to calm, still water.

he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths.

Sheep wander and get into places they can't get out of

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me;

Wolves like to eat sheep, so the good shepherd fights them off!

your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

***a good shepherd uses the rod to beat off animals
and a staff to pull sheep back from dangerous places***

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

Shepherds take the sheep to a place where they can live and graze in safety!

you anoint my head with oil;

Shepherds used oil as first aid for cuts and injuries.

my cup overflows.

When it comes to a good shepherd, ALL the needs of the sheep are considered.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

When the sheep know their shepherd, they want to follow Him!

Jesus makes a point to ***call himself the GOOD Shepherd*** in John 10.

Many hearing him likely knew this passage from Psalm 23,

And other references to God as the good shepherd from the prophets.

But we've just heard why it would be so powerful for Jesus to say

He is the Good Shepherd--

This is him saying, I am ***God***. And I am ***good***.

Jesus said that he, as the Good Shepherd,
would ***go beyond*** what we read in Psalm 23.

In John 10:11-15 Jesus says:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

¹² ***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.*** ¹³ ***The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not***

care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the **good** shepherd. I **know** my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I **lay down my life** for the sheep.

Friends, Jesus cares that much for us.
 Jesus promised he would give himself up for us,
 And indeed **that's what he did for us on the cross**—defeating sin and death!

The biggest problem we have as sheep--
 Is that sheep want to **go their own way**.
 And, they will **follow each other into trouble or danger**.

Can you think of a time you **tried to do life YOUR way**—
 ignoring God's guidance or direction?
 How did that work out for you?
 How would God's ideas and plans have been better?

Max Lucado says if we think we can control our own lives,
 we might end up with a **23rd Psalm that sounded like this**:

*I am my own shepherd. I am always in need.
 I stumble from mall to mall, and shrink to shrink,
 seeking relief but never finding it.
 I creep through the valley of the shadow of death, and fall apart.
 I fear everything from pesticides to power lines,
 and I'm starting to act like my mother.
 I go down to the weekly staff meeting, and am surrounded by enemies.
 I go home, and even my goldfish scowls at me.
 I anoint my headache with extra strength Tylenol.
 My Jack Daniel's runneth over.
 Surely misery and misfortune will follow me,
 and I will live in self-doubt for the rest of my lonely life.*
 Max Lucado, *Traveling Light*, Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 2001, pg. 25-6.

Yikes.
 Self-reliance is not all it's cracked up to be, right?

We need the Shepherd.

And notice that it says: ***The Lord IS my shepherd.***

Not the Lord **will be**, or the Lord **has been**, but the Lord **IS** my shepherd.

As in, **today**, right now.

Now, if I would just ***stop trying to make my own way,***

Maybe I could receive the care of the Good Shepherd,

Who knows the best way to lead my life.

Maybe if we could let go, we wouldn't worry so much about which way to go!

In one of my favorite devotionals, *Streams in the Desert*,

there's a story on June 9th about two women.

One of them earned a very small salary through hard labor,

but was full of joy as a Christian.

Another Christian woman said to her one day:

"Nancy I understand your happiness today,

but I would think your future prospects would sober you.

Suppose, for instance, you experience a time of illness and are unable to work..

or suppose your employer moves away, or suppose..."

"Stop, said Nancy. I never suppose. The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.

And besides, it's all that SUPPOSING that's making you so miserable.

You'd better give that up and trust the Lord".

L.B. Cowman editor, *Streams in the Desert*, Zondervan: Michigan, 1997. Pg. 225.

The question is, can WE stop supposing?

And ***just trust our Good Shepherd?***

Do you know HOW shepherds in Biblical times herded the sheep?

It was by ***leading them, with their voice.***

The shepherd ***went ahead***, to find the still water and green pastures,

to make sure the way was clear of danger,

to show them where to go and how.

The fact that our Good Shepherd Jesus walks out in front of us

Can help us let go of "supposing"!

We can let go of our worry and anxiety about tomorrow,

Because Jesus walks out in front of us. He ***is already in tomorrow—***

So we can let go of our worry and fear.

F.B. Meyer said that

*“All the tomorrows of our life **have to pass through Him** before they can get to us”.*

Have you ever thought about the future that way?

That God is already there—so we can leave it in God’s hands,
and just ***focus on today?***

Jesus says in Matthew 6:

do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow has enough troubles of it’s own...seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you as well.

Friends, ***hear the Good News of the Gospel today:***

Jesus is our Good Shepherd.

We can ***trust Him, and follow*** Him,

And find that ***His way brings us meaning, and joy.***

And for our Good shepherd, all God’s people can say, Amen.