

Beside Still Waters

Ezekiel 34:11-22, John 10:22-30

Today we continue our series on the 23rd Psalm. I know it can be tough to do a series in the summer, because it's hard to have a sense of continuity when people go away, and sometimes are not as diligent about their worship attendance in the summer. It's the challenge we face as a church. And so I start with a version of the 23rd Psalm that addresses this very problem: (this one is especially relevant to those who go camping)

Recreation is my shepherd, I shall not stay at home; It maketh me to lie down in a sleeping bag; It leadeth me down the interstate each weekend.

It restoreth my suntan; It leadeth me to state parks for comfort's sake. Even though I stray on the Lord's Day, I will fear no reprimand, for I am relaxed; My fishing rod and reel they comfort me.

I anointed my skin with oil, My gas tank runneth dry; Surely my trailer shall follow me all the weekends of summer, And I shall return to the house of the Lord this fall.

But by then, it will be football season, And that's another psalm.

Well I hope when you are not away on vacation, you will find your way into the house of the Lord and come to give your worship to God.

Congregation recites verse 1 & 2: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside still waters.*

He leads me beside still waters...one of the favorite games of small children is "Follow the leader" One child becomes the leader who then goes through a range of motions and activities and the rest of the group is supposed to follow. All of us are followers of one kind or another. There are those things that we consider important and we put our time and energy into it. And we will look up to those persons who are the most influential or the "experts" of our interests and try to follow them. I remember in the first church I served, I had the privilege to occasionally go fishing with a great fisherman in the congregation whose name was Fillmore Cavileer. A great name for a fisherman. While we were out in his boat, there would be

Beside Still Waters

communication on the waters among the other boats by means of a CB radio. Well, one person made the comment that it was important for everyone to keep their eyes on Fillmore's boat, for that's where the fish would be found. And sure enough, we located the spot where there was the most fish. Soon other boats were heading our way. When your following someone, it makes a big difference when you know who to follow.

The Psalmist David speaks very clearly about the leader we should follow. The Lord who is my shepherd, I shall not want. As we said last week, when we know this Shepherd, we have everything in life that we need. The Lord is my shepherd who wants to place his mark of ownership on each of us...to claim us as his own, that's when I can find fulfillment and satisfaction. It is in the Shepherd's care.

Today we look at verse 2: He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters.

In Philip Keller's book, [A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23](#), Philip makes an interesting statement about the nature of sheep. And it really gives insight to the meaning of this verse. He says that for sheep it is impossible for them to be made to lie down unless 4 conditions are met:

One: they must be free from all fear. Two: they must be free from friction from others in the flock. Three: They need to be free of pests (like flies and parasites) And Fourth: they need to be free from hunger. These four conditions. If any of these conditions are not met, the sheep don't want to lie down. And so it becomes the responsibility of the shepherd to provide for his sheep in such a way that these four conditions are taken care of. For it is then and only then they can lie down to rest, to relax and to be truly content.

And yes, we are like sheep. We know its true. If we are really going to experience peace and contentment our situation is very similar. I want to us take a look at these four conditions and see how they relate to us. The first to be free of all fear. Sheep are very timid by nature. They are easily panicked. Even a stray jackrabbit suddenly bounding from behind a bush can stampede a whole flock. If there is suspicion of danger, from coyotes, cougars, or other enemies of sheep, the sheep are ready to stand up and flee for their lives. That's why the shepherd's role is so important for the sheep. He becomes their means of protection and is constantly on the lookout for anything that could harm his sheep. Philip Keller said that as a shepherd himself, I came to

Beside Still Waters

realize in the course of time, that nothing so quieted and reassured my sheep as for them to see me in the field. To me that such a beautiful picture for the follower of Christ. That in life, there is no substitute for the keen awareness that My Shepherd, My Lord is with me. That I could trust in his care, this loving Shepherd who come to dispel my fears. As the Scripture says in I John: "There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear."

I don't have to tell you that we live in a very fearful age. It seems to be a time of increasing anxiety. All of the incidents of terror, the acts of violence, the messages of hate...we are filled with anxiety and fear. And those fears can be compounded with our own situations...maybe it has to do with the security of our job situation, the tensions in a marriage, uncertainty about our future...And we are anxious and our first reaction is to simply get up and run from our problems or to try to hide or deny their existence. I wonder if you feel that way this morning and you wish there was some easy way out or some way to escape. But I want you to picture in your mind a different scene. I want you to see Jesus, the Good Shepherd in the field of your life. To see Jesus, to know his presence in the midst of your situation. It certainly puts a different perspective on the whole scene. I want you to hear this promise from God's word and allow it to sink into your being: "For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love and of a sound mind." What are the fears and anxieties that are weighing on you. It is knowing the presence and peace of the Great Shepherd that makes all the difference.

The second condition that keeps sheep from lying down is the friction and rivalry they experience with other sheep. It is interesting to note that just about every animal society has its own established order of dominance or status within the group. In a group of chickens, it is called a pecking order. (I'm sure Doug Sell has noticed that with his chickens) With cattle it is called a horning order. And among sheep it is called a butting order. So you will have this more arrogant, domineering usually older ewe who will be the boss of any bunch of sheep. This sheep will maintain her position of prestige by butting and driving the other ewes or lambs from the best grazing areas. And then succeeding her are the other sheep doing the same thing with the less threatening sheep until a precise order is established. You get a vivid picture of this in our Old Testament reading today from the book of Ezekiel. Here is description of the fat lambs and you read about God's

Beside Still Waters

concern for the poor and weaker lambs. You have this rivalry in sheep which makes it difficult for them to lie down in contentment. Again it is the presence of the shepherd, when the shepherd gets the attention of the sheep, they seem to forget their rivalries and stop their butting and fighting.

Well, we know we are not immune to the same thing as human beings. Of course, we know those rivalries exist in the world, but they also happen in communities, in families, and yes even in churches. Where it seems to be more important to get my point of view across than listen or reach out to someone else. We too fight for power and status. We often have to check our own selfish attitudes and examine our personal motives. Like the words from Ezekiel remind us, we are called to have compassion for those who feel butted around, those who may be feeling troubled or weak. For when our eyes are upon the Shepherd, the ambition for power and status lose their meaning. We remember the things Jesus taught about human relationships. The one who is the greatest in God's kingdom is the one who is the servant. There is contentment in letting go of having to have our own way and simply trusting in the Lord. It's letting go of selfish pride and finding peace in trusting Jesus.

The third requirement for sheep to lie down is to be free from the pests that bother them. There's always the torment of parasites and insects, all kinds of flies, ticks, and other bugs and it causes such a distraction for the sheep that they simply can't rest. So the diligent shepherd looks for ways to keep his sheep free from these pests.

Well, what are those irritations that are bothering you? Or as we say: "What's bugging you?" Those things that get under our skin, that irritate and become such a nuisance to us. One of the things a shepherd will do is to put soothing oil and those places of irritation for a sheep. He will try to be attentive to those irritations and tenderly apply some kind of oil or ointment. It's interesting that in the Bible, the Holy Spirit is sometimes symbolized by oil. That which can bring healing and comfort. We all face those harsh, and irritating aspects of life, but I need the presence of God's Spirit in me to bring me strength, peace, and comfort. Not that we will ever be free from all the things that "bug" us. But we can come to our loving Shepherd, and cry out: "This is beyond me, I can't cope with this problem, this is really bugging me, and I can't rest. And we ask for the comforting, soothing presence of the Holy Spirit to give us that rest.

Beside Still Waters

And the last requirement? Freedom from hunger. Maybe that's what we think of most about this verse. Being able to lie down in green pastures. When you think about it, you realize that many of the great sheep countries of the world are in dry, semi-arid lands. The Israelite people often lived in a desert land and those who raised sheep had to survive on the meager grass and water found there. And so it could be hard to find green pastures. It doesn't just happen by chance. It takes that hard work of a shepherd. Actually the presence of a good shepherd can mean the difference between life and death for the sheep. It may require clearing some hard and rocky ground, it will mean diligent searching for better grazing areas. Hungry sheep are ever on their feet, searching for something to satisfy them. For the follower of the Lord, it is finding that nourishment that fills our souls. Jesus spoke about it in John 10: I have come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly. Jesus as our Shepherd wants to dig at the soil of our hearts, clear out the rough spots, tear out the roots of bitterness, and then sow the promises of his word into our hearts. That's what produces the fruit of contentment...that abundant life the Good Shepherd gives us.

There is one more part of this verse, I don't want us to miss...The Shepherd also leads us by the still waters. There's an interesting difference between cows and sheep. If you want to get cows to go anywhere, you have to get behind them and push – and you better watch where you step. Cows have to be herded in order to be moved. But not sheep. For a sheep to go anywhere, it must be led. Sheep are followers. Sometimes to their peril especially when led by other sheep. The flocking and following instinct of sheep is so strong that it caused the death of 400 sheep in 2006 in eastern Turkey. The sheep plunged to their death after one of the sheep tried to cross a 15-meter deep ravine, and the rest of the flock followed. That's why its important that the sheep have a shepherd goes ahead of them and shows them that everything is all right. And so he leads them beside still waters. And it needs to be still waters. Sheep will not drink from swiftly running water for a good reason: they are poor swimmers. If their wool coat became soaked with water the weight will pull the sheep under water. Instinctively sheep know this, so they will not go near swiftly running water. But they still must have water to drink. And so the shepherd needs to find the best drinking places or his sheep will become restless. Actually often the water for sheep comes from the dew on the

Beside Still Waters

grass. That sheep can go a long time, especially if the weather is not too hot, by consuming the grass that is full of dew. So sheep just by habit will rise just before dawn and start to feed, the time when the grass is often drenched with dew. Dew that is a clear, clean source of water. What a beautiful sight for the Shepherd to see the still waters from the silver droplets of dew hanging on the grass and watching his sheep walk through the grass feeding heavily and contently. Maybe that's a good picture for us. To find those quiet times of spiritual feeding. To feed on the Word of God, to find its nourishment and refreshment for our souls. In those quiet time of prayer and meditation, when we drink from those everlasting waters of Scripture. It is then we feel led by the still waters. This picture reminds us of Jesus who said, "*Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28). He makes me to lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside the still waters. I trust the words this Psalm are encouraging to your heart. Lindsay Mitchell mentioned to me last week, that sometimes when he has trouble sleeping at night, he will say in his mind the words of the 23rd Psalm. He said it's actually a better alternative to counting sheep. Well, the one who is our Great Shepherd wants to give us that peace and rest in a very unsettled and anxious world. To be our source of comfort and strength when we go through trying times. Let us find the assurance of his presence that helps us to lie down knowing the peace and contentment God gives.