

I thought that a change of mood would be welcome. The passages that we have been looking at in the Book of Revelation are designed to be comforting for the people of God and I hope that the pictures that Revelation 4,5 and 6:1-8 describe for us will be portable in the sense that we can remember them and take them with us and be encouraged by them in this time of pandemic: God is sitting on the throne with the church gathered before him in worship; The Lamb that was slain has the scroll of God's plan in his hand because he is worthy to open it seals; And the great earth-shaking disasters come upon the earth only when the Lamb opens the seals of the scroll. These are wonderful images that we can take with us and, with God's blessing, be strengthened in our hearts in the light of what is going on now and what will come in the future.

But there is a special kind of atmosphere in those passages. The imagery is out of this world. The word that describes the genre is "apocalyptic" and that is a noisy genre. There is thunder and lightning. There is loud singing. And there are pictures of wars and suffering on a massive scale. There is great comfort there, but it comes amidst a lot of strangeness, upheaval and noise. I thought it was time for a change in atmosphere. And so I thought of Psalm 23. "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." That's as far as we will get this morning.

This is a very different atmosphere. It is a peaceful picture. It is a pastoral scene that is painted. Needs are being met. The imagery is that of rest and refreshment and restoration. This is a place of quietness, security and comfort.

It is important to understand that this does not mean that this Psalm is describing a situation where there are no troubles or concerns. Psalm 23 is not describing a life where there is no danger, where there are no concerns about the future. The tranquility of these verses are not about our outward circumstances. The second half of the Psalm speaks about walking through the valley of the shadow of death and the presence of enemies. So what the Psalm is describing is trust in the Lord in the midst of danger and hardship and suffering. Applying it to our situation - it is not saying that since the LORD is our shepherd, we will be financially unaffected by the pandemic, that we will be immune to the virus and that we will not lose loved ones or even die ourselves. If God is our shepherd, it does not mean that our life **externally** will be tranquil and serene.

And yet this Psalm is not presenting a fiction. This Psalm is true. It is describing truthfully what it means to be a sheep of this shepherd. And if we truly grasp that reality and trust utterly in the LORD our shepherd, we can experience the peace that this Psalm describes even in the most difficult of circumstances.

That is one of the wonderful things about the biblical message for God's people. Because of who God is and because of what is ultimately most important, it is possible, by God grace, to experience peace and confidence in times of hardship, difficulty and uncertainty. That is not to say that such peace is automatic and easy, but it is to say that it is possible and desirable for the people of God. It honors God when we trust in him in times when trusting is hard.

In this case God is described as our shepherd. The basic image is that of a regular shepherd, a keeper of sheep, but the way that the shepherding imagery is used in Scripture suggests that we should think of a shepherd-king. David, especially, is the central human shepherd-king in the OT. Psalm 78:70-72 paints a beautiful picture of David as a shepherd-king. ⁷⁰He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; ⁷¹from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. ⁷²With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand." And this leads us to Jesus as the Son of David and the ultimate shepherd to give his life for his sheep. The following verse Isaiah, 40:11, gives us a beautiful prophecy that describes the promised Saviour as a shepherd. "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom."

So it is easy to make the connection from God as revealed in the OT, to David and to Jesus following the biblical use of the imagery of a shepherd. We can rightfully think of the triune God as our shepherd and Jesus in particular as our shepherd if we are followers of Jesus Christ – believers in Jesus Christ.

Now one of the comforting thoughts about the idea of a shepherd is that it is the job of the shepherd to keep the sheep – that is - to keep them safe and to keep them fed and to manage them in such a way that they do well. If the sheep are not healthy, safe and well fed, the shepherd is not doing his job. It is the job of the shepherd to make sure that the sheep have everything that they need and that they are protected from danger.

And it is wonderful that God, in his word, teaches us to think of him as our shepherd. By that he is saying, "It is my job to keep you safe and it is my job supply all your needs." That is what God is saying to us in this Psalm. This Psalm is written by David, but because God has seen fit to include it in his Word, the Bible, God is saying that this Psalm is for all of his people. So if we are followers of Jesus, we can rightly say with Psalm 100, "[W]e are his people, the sheep of his pasture."

God has taken it upon himself to be our shepherd. This is not something that David thought up. This is something that God has revealed. We know what God is like because he tells us in his Word. And so in this Psalm and in many other places God is saying to us, "This is a job that I have taken upon myself. I am your shepherd."

And what that means then is that God has committed himself to provide for us – to protect us and to nurture us so that we flourish as his people. This is an amazing thought because of who God is.

When we think of human shepherds and literal sheep, human shepherds are limited in many different ways. In hard times, they may not be able to find enough grass and water. A bear or a lion may grab one of their sheep before they can do anything about it. A sheep might get sick and the shepherd may not be able to nurse that sheep back to health. Human shepherds are limited, but the Lord does not share those limitations. The Lord our shepherd is unlimited in his power and wisdom and attention. There is no situation that is beyond him.

There is nothing that can keep him from doing his job. He has taken upon himself the task of keeping his sheep and that means he will keep his sheep. He will do the best possible job. He has no limitations. And so the sheep are absolutely secure.

And that is why we can say these words with confidence if we are indeed trusting and obeying in Jesus. I have to keep on putting in that qualifier. The LORD is not everyone's shepherd. The Lord is not the shepherd of those who are living in wickedness. The Lord is not the shepherd of those who are not relying on Jesus for their standing with God. The Lord is not the shepherd of those who are not displaying the fruits of salvation in their lives.

That is not to say that the Lord is only the shepherd of people whose lives are overflowing with fruit. He is also the shepherd of the weak and the immature and the wounded who believe in Jesus. Not all sheep are healthy or equally mature. But all sheep are seeking to live lives that are pleasing to God even though with many faults and short-comings. But it must be clear that the Lord is not everyone's shepherd. He is the shepherd of his people and his people are those who are trusting in Jesus and following him even though there are many weaknesses.

However, every believer can say these words, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me besides the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

Now what does this mean for us in the current pandemic. It does not mean that we will not die. Every single sheep from the day this Psalm was written, except the people who are alive right now, has died. They died in all kinds of different ways. Some have died of old age or natural causes. Some have died as babies or little children. Some have died in the prime of life through sickness or accident or at the hand of some enemy. Some died as martyrs. If God being the shepherd of his people means that they would not die physically, God has not been a very good shepherd.

Also it does not mean that we will not be poor and even have trouble finding enough to eat. Just think of the hard time the first generation of Christians had in Jerusalem. It was for them that Paul organized the collection among the Gentile churches. There is no hint that the hard times that the Christians in Jerusalem experienced happened because God was neglecting his commitment to be their shepherd or was unable to make their lives easier.

Clearly God being the shepherd of his people does not mean they will not get sick or die or have a hard time making ends meet – even to the point of having a hard time putting food on the table. God's sheep in the Bible and throughout history have struggled in all of these ways – but through it all these words of Psalm 23 have been true for them.

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me besides the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

Now interestingly enough, that does not mean that God’s shepherding has nothing to do with meeting our physical needs. A key passage here is Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6:25ff where Jesus tells us not to be anxious about what we will eat or drink or our clothing. In those wonderful verses, Jesus tells us that we should not be anxious about such things because “your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.” If we use this passage to help us understand how to apply Psalm 23, it becomes clear that when the text says that the sheep will not want, it means that we can trust that the Lord will provide us with the things Jesus tells us not to worry about in Matthew 6:25ff: food, drink, clothing.

“The LORD is my shepherd, I will not want,” means that God will take care of our physical needs as long as we are in this life. At some point he is going to call us home, but until that point he will provide for our physical needs - according to his love and his wisdom and his plan for our growth in grace. This does not mean that he will preserve the lifestyle we have enjoyed or that he will give us the lifestyle that we might desire. Rather he will give us what we need according to his perfectly wise and loving decision concerning what that will look like. That is why Jesus tells us to pray for our daily bread rather than riches and it is why Paul exhorts us to be content when we have food and clothing. “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want,” means that we shall not lack anything that we need and what that looks like is determined by God’s wise program for our true wellbeing according to his definition of true wellbeing – which has a lot more to do with holiness than it has to do with prosperity.

And it is confidence in God’s love, and goodness, and wisdom in designing our educational program that makes it possible for us to experience the peace and tranquility that verses 2-3 describe. “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name sake.” That is a wonderful picture of peace and tranquility. But David was under no illusion that all of God’s sheep all of the time would live outwardly in such idyllic circumstances. The second half of this Psalm makes that very clear – as does the rest of the Bible. One of the huge themes in the Bible has to do with helping the people of God suffer with confidence in God’s love.

The point of the first two verses of Psalm 23 is that trusting in God as our shepherd will enable us to experience the tranquility they describe. We live like sheep lying down in green pastures and being led beside still waters when we are trusting that our shepherd is guiding our lives in the best possible way. Trust is the key here when it comes to experiencing what Psalm 23 describes.

This thought is expressed in a beautiful way in Isaiah 26:3: “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.”

Now this is not automatic or easy. Not much in the Christian life is automatic or easy. That is not how God has designed us or our salvation. He does what we cannot do like paying the penalty for our sins and bringing us from spiritual death to spiritual life, but living the life that he enables us to live requires effort on our part. Trusting in God so that we experience the peace that Psalm 23 describes takes effort on our part – God enabled effort, but effort none-the-less.

In times when things are easy, it is a challenge to know whether we are trusting in God or in the economy or in our skills and employability. We may feel like a sheep lying in a green pasture because we feel our job is secure and we are enjoying sitting in the shade on a Saturday afternoon. That can and ought to be a godly experience when there is a connection in our mind between enjoying the peace of the green pasture and the fact that God has led us there. It may also be that we feel like a sheep lying in green pasture because we are trusting in the idol of self or of the economy.

But when a pandemic hits and the world is turned upside down and the economy goes south – it is a different kind of challenge to experience the tranquility of the green pasture precisely because God is our shepherd. And whatever else God may be doing and saying in this pandemic, he is certainly giving us the chance to practice trusting him as our shepherd as things that we are tempted to trust in in good times are suddenly a whole lot less solid than we thought.

So how do we learn to trust in God so that we can experience the peacefulness of the pasture and the tranquility of the still waters when our external world is giving way beneath our feet. Well one of the ways is practice. We learn through experience. And so whatever else God is doing during this pandemic he has placed us in these circumstances in order to give us some practice in trusting him when our world no longer seems to be such a secure place. Practice makes perfect is the proverbial wisdom. Not that we will ever be perfect, but God is giving us practice so that we can move in that direction.

But there must be an intentionality about this. This Psalm is an expression of what trusting in God looks like and so it is also a call for us to trust in the LORD as our shepherd so that we honor God by lying down in green pastures and following him beside the still waters. One of the ways that we do this is to bring to mind the truth of God word, particularly about God's care for his people, and fortify our hearts with them. We must do that prayerfully because we realize that we can't do it without enabling grace, but we must do it. Listen to the way in which the Psalmist of Psalm 42 did this. Psalm 42:5 "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." The psalmist is talking to himself. He is arguing with himself. He is admonishing himself. And he is directing himself to hope in God.

We can do that with Psalm 23. We can dwell on the fact that God's job is to be our shepherd and our job to trust the shepherd and honor him by being confident in his shepherding of our lives.

Our shepherd restores our souls. Now here the Psalm leaves the imagery, but the shepherding imagery still informs what he is saying. Sheep don't have souls. Human beings have souls. But sheep can be tired. They can be afraid. They can be hungry and thirsty. They can feel unsettled. And whatever a sheep's inner life is called, it can be restored by lying down in green pastures and walking beside still waters. There is a big difference between a sheep who is quiet and refreshed and one who is hungry and tired and unhappy with the circumstances with his life.

So the shepherd seeks to direct the lives of his sheep in such a way that their souls are restored even though they do not literally have souls. And we know what that means for human-sheep. And here we are assured that this is one of the things that belongs to the job that the shepherd has taken upon himself. He restores my soul. We know what it is when our souls are restored.

Here some of the language of the KJV is helpful. The word "disquieted" comes to mind. In the KJ version of Psalm 42 the psalmist says to his soul, "Why art thou disquieted in me?" He also asks, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul." Our souls can be disquieted and cast down. They can be fearful and anxious. They can be burdened with care. There are lots of words and phrases to describe our souls when they are in need of restoration.

The souls of the sheep are restored when they are fed, when they feel safe and when they are at rest. This is how the shepherd restores the souls of his sheep. And this is how the shepherd restores the souls of his human sheep as well.

Let's start with rest. Jesus says in Matthew 11:28 "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." The greatest way that Jesus gives us rest is by removing from us the burden and the curse of the law. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we are set free from the curse of the law. That means that in Christ we are accepted by God without reservation and with great enthusiasm because of all that Jesus has done for us – dying for us – but also keeping the law in our place so that all the requirements for our full acceptance with God are fully met.

Jesus says the same thing to his disciples in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled neither let them be afraid." The rest and peace that Jesus gives restores our souls. The greatest need of our souls is to know that God accepts us and is pleased with us. This is the greatest way that the shepherd restores our souls.

But a huge part of that is that he himself restores our souls. Once our sins are taken away, the separation between us and God is gone so that we can love and worship and enjoy fellowship with him. Jesus says in John 6:35 "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." Psalm 63 puts this in OT terms. Verse 3 "Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will

praise you." Verse 5, "My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips."

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want, He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." Jesus as the great shepherd gives us rest and peace and he himself satisfies our souls because he is God and it is only in loving and worshipping and fellowship with God that human souls are satisfied.

And there is also safety. The shepherd keeps the sheep safe. Jesus spoke of this in John 10; "Verses 11-13, "¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep."

Later on he says in John 10:27-28, "²⁷My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."

Jesus is our great shepherd. He laid down his life for his sheep. He is the opposite of the hired hand who flees when he sees the wolf coming. Jesus stood up to the wolf. Jesus stood up to the great enemy of our souls – the devil. He did that in a surprising way by conquering death by giving his life for our sins. And so the wolf can no longer get us. He can harass us for the time being, but he cannot get us. Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."

Jesus is our great shepherd. He leads us and we follow him. He restores our souls. He is the food for our souls. He gives us rest and peace and in him we are safe. And so we can experience what the first few verses of Psalm 23 describes. "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me besides the still waters. He restores my soul."

Let us trust in our shepherd. He has taken it upon himself to be our shepherd. He is committed to take care of his sheep. He will not fail. And because of that we can know peace and tranquility of these verses through trust in our shepherd.