

Sermons at the
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

May 8, 2022 (4th Sunday of Easter, Year C)
John 20:22-30
Psalm 23

Let's begin today with a quick video that went viral a few years ago.

(Watch Sheep in the backyard.)

It's funny, but I showed it to you today because it also illustrates a point – when Jesus calls us sheep, it's not really a COMPLEMENT. Sheep are NOT smart. And sometimes that means that WE are our OWN worst enemy.

Professor Chad Bird wrote a devotion about the sheep in John 10, and I'd like to share some of it with you. Permit me an extended quote here, because this is REALLY good.

The Lord is my shepherd, but I STILL WANT. I want whatever my heart desires. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, but I spy grass that is GREENER on the OTHER side of the fence. He leadeth me beside the still waters, but I know of STILL more EXCITING places where I'd love to drink my fill.

He restoreth my soul, when I WANT to live life the way I see fit. He maketh me to walk in the paths of righteousness, when I WANT to run in the open fields of the WORLD—eating WHERE I want, sleeping WITH WHOMEVER I want, living like the BEAST I am.

He leads me for His name's sake, but I WANT to make a name for MYSELF. I want others to ENVY me, to speak ILL of me if they wish, but SECRETLY to COVET who I am and what I've DONE.

Oh, the shepherd's rod is RESTRICTIVE and His staff is STIFLING to my animalistic heart! Come valleys of the shadow of death, come storm and wind, hail and rain, I shall not fear, for I know the lay of the land, I've been around the block, and I'm not SHEEPISH about telling you so.

Such is OUR version of Psalm 23. Or, SO our UNTAMED hearts sing. We don't want a Good SHEPHERD, but a HIRELING, one who does NOT own us. We crave our FREEDOMS: freedom to walk in UNRIGHTEOUS paths, if the end justifies the means; freedom to lie down in ... whatever BED our lower appetites CHOOSE; freedom to pull the wool over men's eyes, to TWIST EVERY story to paint OURSELVES in the best light, to LIE when we ought to CONFESS, and to confess OTHER men's lies to make our OWN wool seem that much WHITER than theirs.

We are ALL SHEEP GOING astray.

RETURN to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. For the freedoms you crave are SLAVERIES in DISGUISE, CHAINS that hell's BUTCHERS cast around your neck to pull you under the slaughterhouse blade.

The Lord is your SHEPHERD, your GOOD Shepherd. And all He WANTS is YOU.

I who so often turn my back on the fold and its shepherd? Yes, you.

I who have cursed His staff, ignored His call, gone my own way? Yes, you.

I who have been more like a wolf than a sheep, angrily tearing away at those around me? Yes, the Good Shepherd wants ONLY YOU.

Shall you fear what mere mortals THINK of you when God HIMSELF calls you His CHILD, His friend, His BELOVED? Shall you fear that your rebellious ways have SEPARATED you from God when He makes you bone of HIS bone and flesh of HIS flesh?

Have no fear, little flock, for He, who is known by the FATHER, knows YOU, calls you by name, and has made you His own. He gives you eternal life. You shall never perish.

He raised you up from the pit into which you have fallen. He placed you upon His shoulders and rejoiced to carry you home. He washed you in cleansing waters, bound up that which was broken, and healed all your wounds. He prepared an altar before you and anointed your head with oil. His cup continually runs over—over your lips, over your SINS, QUENCHING your thirst while making you YEARN for MORE.

ALL this He does for YOU. And BECAUSE He is the Good Shepherd, YOU are His good SHEEP. He gives His life for you. He makes YOUR life His OWN, and HIS life YOUR own. He became what YOU are, in order to make YOU what HE is.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you, shall precede you, shall be on your right and on your left, above you and below you, all the days of your life, and you shall dwell in the flock of the Lord forever.

Well said, Reverend Bird.

The 23rd psalm is one of THE most beloved passages in ALL of scripture. It's read beside hospital beds, in hospice rooms, and at funerals. All it takes is hearing that first verse, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," and you feel a DEEP sense of belonging, comfort, and peace. The psalm ENDS with a SIMILAR promise of belonging: "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

But BETWEEN those opening and closing verses, there's MOVEMENT. Belonging to the shepherd doesn't mean standing STILL. It means CHANGING from an unruly HEARD, bent on our own destruction, INTO TRUSTING FOLLOWERS of our SHEPHERD.

And so our Lord takes us on a journey. Our Good Shepherd KNOWS that the road to heaven doesn't go THROUGH that guy's back yard. He takes us ANOTHER way. We FOLLOW our shepherd as he guides us by green pastures, brings us to still waters, leads us in right pathways, and accompanies us through dark valleys. As disciples of Jesus, we are sheep on the move. It's the JOURNEY of LIFE, of TRANSFORMATION. BECAUSE He is the Good Shepherd, we BECOME His good SHEEP. We don't start OUT that way, but we BECOME good sheep.

ON this journey, our SOULS GRATEFULLY cry out, "You anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

And the Good Shepherd says, "THESE are my sheep. I KNOW them, and they FOLLOW me. I give them eternal life, and they will NEVER perish. NO one will snatch them out of my hand."

You see, we FOLLOW our Shepherd, because his LOVE PROTECTS us, and because we know that at journey's END, we can say "I will dwell in the HOUSE of the LORD forever." FOREVER. Amen.