

July/Aug 2025

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

The Shepherd Still Leads Us

ALSO: PETER THE APOSTLE

Dear Friends:

It's probably no surprise that surveys show Psalm 23 is the most popular psalm in the Bible. Its striking picture of the Lord tenderly caring for us like a shepherd leading his flock offers deep comfort, assurance, and the promise of God's abiding presence. In the month of July, Lesli van Milligen, director of the Thrive ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, explores Psalm 23 in view of God's care and leading of us, his flock, his people.



And for the month of August, I've had the privilege to explore the life of the apostle Peter, reflecting on his triumphs and tragedies. Throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, Peter stands out among Jesus' disciples for his bold questions, statements, and actions. Yet Peter also stumbles in his faithfulness as a follower and friend of Jesus. Peter even denies knowing Jesus when he is threatened. From the life and ministry of Peter, however, we learn that God sticks with us through thick and thin and can use even us to build his church and share the love of Jesus with the world.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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**“The Shepherd Still
Leads Us”**
Lesli van Milligen



“Peter the Apostle”
Kurt Selles

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**ReFrame
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The Shepherd Still Leads Us

Lesli van Milligen

july

Psalms 23 is one of the most widely known passages in the Bible. A favorite of many believers, this psalm is even mentioned in some popular movies. I have wondered, though, if hearing a favorite psalm many, many times can make us less curious about it and the insights it offers. This month let's explore what it means that the Lord is our shepherd and that we are his sheep. I'm hoping that a deep dive into this familiar psalm and some other Bible passages will refresh us and give us confidence in the Lord's call on our lives.

Rev. Lesli van Milligen is the director of Thrive, a ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America focused on equipping and encouraging churches and ministry leaders. She lives near Toronto, Ontario, and enjoys traveling, exploring new cuisines, and spending time with her husband, Tom, and her two daughters.

Peter the Apostle

Kurt Selles

august

As one of Jesus' closest disciples, the apostle Peter is a major figure in the New Testament. Peter is an interesting character who asks Jesus lots of questions, makes some of the boldest declarations, and often takes the boldest actions. His weaknesses at times also topple him in defeat. Through Peter we learn a lot about Jesus and about ourselves, and we learn that Jesus loves us in our victories and even in our defeats.

Kurt Selles is the director of ReFrame Ministries, which publishes these devotions. Kurt has served as a missionary in Taiwan and China and has also taught missions. Kurt and his wife, Vicki, have three adult children.

FINDING THE RIGHT GUIDE

The LORD is my shepherd. . . .

—Psalm 23:1

There are many times when I have needed the help of a guide: an IT expert to help me with my computer; a nurse to help me understand a diagnosis; a biking guide to help me set the pace on unfamiliar roads. Some of these guides have been more helpful than others. A lot depended on how much they knew me and cared for me as a person.

When I reflect on how the Lord shepherds or guides us, I am struck by two important things. First, the one who has made us and knows us intimately is the one who invites us to follow him as our shepherd. He knows our names. He understands our strengths and weaknesses. He knows where we will find the journey challenging and where we will find joy. This gives us comfort and hope for the journey.

Second, the Lord knows and cares for all of his sheep—every one of us. While some of us will follow similar paths, they will not be exactly the same, and many of us will follow quite different paths. But each one of us can say, “The LORD is my shepherd. . . .” because he is leading each one of us, and we will lack nothing for the journey he takes us on through life. Everyone who follows the good shepherd can have the same confidence that they are being guided well by the one who loves them best.

In what ways does the Lord’s guidance help you?

Thank you, Lord, for being our guide. We pray that you will continue to make your will and way plain to us. Amen.

FEELING SHEEPISH

The LORD is my shepherd. . . .

—Psalm 23:1

If the Lord is our shepherd, then the psalm writer is thinking of us as sheep.

I'm not so sure that I like being compared to a sheep. Sheep are not very bright. Humans are far more intelligent. For better or worse, we have more capacity for directing our own lives. So how are we like sheep?

I wonder if the psalm writer might be highlighting how vulnerable sheep are. They have few defenses from predators, for example. And sheep are not very good at finding their way or finding the best grazing areas. They need a shepherd to bring them to good pastures and to find good water to drink.

We humans are vulnerable too. We often lead hurried, distracted lives that wear us out and leave little room for the things that will refresh our souls. We don't always choose what is good for us.

We can get confused about who our enemies are, and we often forget that our major enemy, the father of lies, will tell us anything to make us believe that we are unworthy of the shepherd's attention and care. We fall for the lie that there isn't enough to go around and that we need to get what we can before it is all gone. The deceiver makes us think that we are alone on the journey.

We are vulnerable, and we need a shepherd. In what other ways are we like sheep in need of a shepherd?

We need you, Good Shepherd. Help us to entrust our vulnerabilities to your wise care, knowing that we cannot manage our lives well on our own. Amen.

ACTING SHEEPISH

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way. . . .
—Isaiah 53:6

Sheep need particular care. They need to be led to still waters because they can't drink safely from fast-moving streams. They can't predict when the grass will run out and when they need to move to new pastures. Often there are holes in the ground that dangerous snakes can shelter in, and sheep do not suspect that they could be bitten.

We need special care as well. We can't always predict the dangers and challenges ahead; nor do we always make wise choices. We don't always pace ourselves well when it comes to managing our resources and our day-to-day living. We are prone to burning out and tuning out—both of which can lead us astray.

Of course there are other ways in which we are like sheep. We are easily distracted by anyone or anything besides the shep-

herd. So many shiny and alluring things draw our attention. Social media, TV, shopping, and other things can distract and lead us into pastures that may look inviting but don't satisfy.

The psalm writer reminds us that when we follow the Lord our shepherd, we will lack nothing and that his provisions are soul satisfying. But we are responsible to follow.

In what ways might you have acted sheepish lately?

Forgive us, loving Shepherd, when we don't keep our eyes on you. Push away any distractions that keep us from fully following you. Amen.

TRUSTING SHEEP

... I lack nothing.

—Psalm 23:1

This is a bold statement for the psalm writer to make: “I lack nothing.” Is this a statement that you can make too?

This psalm is attributed to King David, so we might think, “It’s easy for a king to say that he lacks nothing!” (David’s story is found in 1 Samuel 16 – 1 Kings 2.) David wasn’t born into royalty, and he sometimes experienced a great deal of want and danger. He was also well acquainted with sheep because he was a shepherd when he was young. He even understood wandering firsthand because at times he had to be drawn back from paths that would lead to misery.

David is not writing here about having enough stuff. He is testifying to how deeply he trusts the Lord to guide him onto the right paths and to provide for him along the way. I imagine David recalling times when he

was in danger and how God provided him with friends, allies, and spiritual care when he needed these things most. This was true when David’s life was in danger. It was also true when his very soul was in peril because he stole another man’s wife (2 Samuel 11-12).

David declares that the Lord his shepherd is worthy of his trust, and he does this with boldness because the Lord has never let him down.

In what ways has the shepherd provided for you in your journey with him?

Thank you, Good Shepherd, for your constant, loving care. Grow in me a deepening sense of trust in your provision. Amen.

CONTENTED SHEEP

I have learned the secret of being content in . . . every situation . . . whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.
—Philippians 4:12-13

The apostle Paul was someone who followed the Lord as his shepherd through dark valleys of persecution and danger as well as to heights of church growth as new followers of Jesus became part of the Lord's flock. Paul wrote this declaration of trust and contentment in a letter to Christian friends while he was in prison. He recognized the Lord's presence and provision through the gifts of other believers who supported him and shared in his troubles.

Paul found that he could rejoice. He could give thanks. He could be content because he was not alone in his suffering. He experienced the pursuing grace and mercy of God through the support of other Jesus-followers. When he received news of God's continued work, that fed his soul.

In his posture of gratitude Paul was bolstered by recounting God's continued goodness and mercy to him. And that led to contentment. Paul was assured that the shepherd who always led and guided him would continue to do so.

Paul's testimony reminds us that the words of Psalm 23 are more than a beautiful word picture. They are a bold witness to the shepherd who supplies what we need when we need it most—and in ways that may be confusing to people who do not yet follow him.

How has the Lord your shepherd surprised you with his provision and care lately?

Lord, may we too learn to be content in any situation, that we may testify to your gracious care for us. Amen.

RESTED SHEEP

He makes me lie down in green pastures. . . .

—Psalm 23:2

It is a busy season as I write this short devotional message. My list of responsibilities has increased lately, and I have less open time than I would like.

Sheep have a difficult time pacing themselves as well. They need a guide who can provide them with a life-giving cadence. The psalm writer found that with the Lord as his shepherd, he was not driven but made to stop and rest.

Rest is a part of the Lord's kingdom rhythm. All who are within God's care are invited to work diligently for six days and then rest in him on the seventh because that is the best way to live. While resting, we sheep are encouraged to trust that whatever tasks we haven't accomplished or plans we haven't completed will be covered by the one who promises that we will lack nothing.

Resting is one of those invitations that is also a command. Rest! Stopping our labor is a concrete way of showing that we trust the shepherd to make good on his promises to care for us. This is not easy in today's work-driven culture, so the testimony of a rested sheep can actually be quite powerful.

Where in your life might you be invited to slow down?

Good Shepherd, help us to rest in you, trusting that you have us in the palm of your loving hand. Thank you for giving us this confidence. Amen.

ACTING SHEEPISH

He leads me beside quiet waters.

—Psalm 23:2

Water bottles are everywhere these days. Most of us know that our bodies need water and that dehydration can have devastating consequences.

A good shepherd knows that the dry air and relentless sun in a desert climate can dry out and weaken sheep quickly. And where might the shepherd find a good source of water for his sheep? Well, it's important to know that sheep cannot drink from a fast-flowing stream. They can lose their footing and drown in too forceful a flow. A good shepherd will take his staff and make a hollow in the ground next to the stream where the water can pool and be safe for the sheep to drink from.

There are many times when life moves so fast that it can feel like we are drinking from a firehose. Many of life's experiences can be very good, but

there are times when even the good things can be overwhelming. The shepherd not only sets a sustainable pace for us but also helps us to slow down so that we can take in all the good that is going on around us, making it more manageable.

The Lord my shepherd provides me with two times of quiet waters each day. Every morning and evening I have a quiet time.

Where might the shepherd be inviting you to rest and reflect beside still waters that will refresh your soul?

Good Shepherd, we live in a busy, noisy world. Lead us to quiet places where we can be revived by your presence in our lives. Amen.

REFRESHED SHEEP*He refreshes my soul.*

—Psalm 23:3

There is good profit for the shepherd who takes good care of his sheep. Good care means it is less likely for the sheep to suffer disease or exhaustion. Good care means the sheep will more likely fetch a good price at the market.

But that is not the motivation of the Lord our shepherd. The care of our shepherd is driven by love and mercy and the desire for abundant flourishing.

The psalm writer tells us that the Lord refreshes his soul. The kind of care that the psalmist receives as he follows the one who loves him deeply reaches the depths of his soul. It is the kind of care that reminds him that he belongs to the shepherd. The psalmist knows he is beloved, cherished, and precious.

Our culture tends to commodify people, and that is anxiety producing, often leaving us to

wonder about ulterior motives. Social media, for example, often encourages us to present false or aspirational impressions of ourselves so that we will be liked.

The Lord's beloved, however, are secure in the knowledge that they are dearly loved just as they are. They are confident in the knowledge that they belong to the Lord and have purpose and hope because they are his and no other's.

In what ways does God's loving care for you refresh your soul?

Lord, slow us down so that we may take time to meditate on your goodness. We thank you that our souls can be refreshed by spending time in your presence. Amen.

RIGHTEOUS SHEEP

He guides me along the right paths. . . .

—Psalm 23:3

The shepherd's main goal for his sheep is soul care. Our souls suffer when we are running quickly and taking life at a pace that is unsustainable. When we try to chart our own course, we often misjudge the best way forward because we are either impatient for good things to happen or scared that they won't. The psalm writer trusts that the shepherd is guiding him along the right paths and that these paths will lead to flourishing.

In some Bible versions these are called paths of righteousness, and that means these pathways honor the shepherd. The way of the shepherd is noble, pure, and ethical, reflecting the very character with which he leads the sheep. Following the right pathways is the best way for the sheep to go because that helps others find and walk in the way of the Lord as well.

I can picture the psalm writer reflecting on God's law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, as the best way to live because it leads to flourishing, full life with God. Loving God and our neighbor is the best way to live, creating shalom (peace) with God and his creation, including all of his creatures. Obeying the Lord, honoring our parents and loved ones, and caring for others and their well-being—all these things lead to living God's way and bringing peace.

Where are you being led today?

Lord, help us to see that empty promises for a better life do not come from you. Redirect us to your path, which leads to life with you. Amen.

TAGGED SHEEP

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

—Psalm 23:3

While sheep are not marked in the same way as cattle, they do bear the mark of their owner along with other helpful information that identifies them.

The Lord's sheep also carry the name of their shepherd. We are God's beloved sheep, and he gives us the best care "for his name's sake." His reputation is reflected in all the ways he cares for us.

What is the Lord our shepherd known for? As God reveals himself throughout his Word, we learn that he is powerful and wise, merciful and all-knowing, faithful and good, gracious and just, loving and trustworthy. God works for the good of his beloved. All of these attributes and more are on display in the way the Lord cares for his sheep.

Our shepherd doesn't want anyone to wonder if he is a fickle or capricious caregiver.

His reputation of constant and consistent care is important because he wants other sheep to join his flock. The care received in his fold is incomparable. Though wandering sheep are tempted by singular self-reliance or by trusting in more earthly things like money, status, or power to see them through, the shepherding Lord wants them to know that his care is best because he knows their needs best and meets them without fail.

The psalmist's statement here is a declaration of faith because nothing in the shepherd's behavior runs contrary to these truths.

What is your declaration of faith?

Lord, help us to reflect your character and will in all that we do. For your name's sake, Amen.

PROTECTED SHEEP

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me. . . .*
—Psalm 23:4

As we noted earlier (July 4), Psalm 23 is attributed to King David. In this part of the psalm, David may be recalling not only his own shepherding days but also times when he was pursued by the armies of King Saul, who wanted to kill him. In both situations David would have traveled through wadis (small canyon-like places) that remained dark even in daylight. These could be dangerous places where animal or human predators would hide in wait, especially for lonely travelers. Yet sometimes a wadi provided the only route to fresh water and greener pastures.

Some translations of this text call this the “valley of the shadow of death” because there are so many possible dangers. A lost lamb has no defenses, but the shepherd carries a rod or stick to ward off predators and a long staff with a hooked end

to grab a lamb that may have fallen into danger or to snatch a sheep out of harm’s way. The wadi is not a place where one would want to travel alone.

Though we may not live near dangerous wadis, the world itself can be a scary place of dark valleys and threats of many kinds. Yet the good news is that we are not abandoned or alone. Our shepherd is with us always.

In what situations have you been comforted by the Lord’s presence?

Lord, at times we can feel as if we are lost in dangerous, dark valleys. Remind us of your presence and protection, we pray. Amen.

COMFORTED SHEEP

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

—Psalm 23:4

The psalm writer, King David of Israel, provides here a lasting testimony of being comforted by the Lord.

Many years after the reign of David, however, destruction came to Israel and Jerusalem. The people faced terrible losses because their kings and other leaders had wandered after the gods of other nations. They had chosen pathways other than the right ones God had set for them. Yet despite the people's calamity and being taken into exile, the prophet Jeremiah in that day made a declaration of faith and hope: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23). In a way like the psalmist, Jeremiah pointed out that the people

could find comfort in God's faithfulness.

There is evil in the world, and there are sinful things that we do, going contrary to the guidance of the Lord our shepherd. And as we learn from the testimony of God's sheep throughout the ages, we can be comforted that the good shepherd does not abandon us in our sin and waywardness. His pursuing grace doesn't give up on us. God is faithful even when we are not.

In our lives today we need to hear this message as well. We will not be consumed because God is faithful!

Lord, remind us of your faithfulness in all the times of our lives. Amen.

GUARDED SHEEP

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

—Psalm 23:5

One of my favorite sights is to see pets and other animals playing in the spring when plants and trees are blossoming and green again. I imagine this is also the case for sheep after a long hike from a well-grazed pasture to a fresh one with lots of lush, green grass.

I have read that before the sheep can frolic in a new space, their shepherds must check through the pasture in case there might be holes that could cause a sheep to stumble and break a leg or where poisonous snakes might be hiding. Shepherds apparently spread a stinky oil near those holes so that the sheep stay away from them and snakes can't make use of them.

Are there any hidden dangers we might encounter as the Lord's sheep today? Could there be "rabbit holes" we go down as we scroll through our

phone and computer screens? And what about messages in advertising and social media that imply we are not enough or don't have enough? What tools does the Lord our shepherd have for those situations?

First, God provides us with his Word, which is also accessible on our phones today. The Bible reminds us who God is and that we belong to him alone. Second, there is the community of believers we can depend on to remind us of these things and to support us.

In what ways have you engaged these resources lately?

Thank you, Lord, for going ahead of us into the scary places and situations in our lives, keeping us safe and secure in your care. Amen.

WELL-OILED SHEEP

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

—Psalm 23:5

This line in Psalm 23 picks up on an interesting tidbit about the shepherd's care for his sheep. Shepherds will use oil on a sheep's head to keep pesky bugs away and to help protect the animal's skin from the sun.

The psalmist David's phrasing here also points symbolically to anointing as a calling or commissioning that comes from God. Anointing a person's head with oil was very significant in ancient Israel. David himself was anointed with oil when God chose him to be the king of Israel (1 Samuel 16:1-13). Prophets and priests were also anointed with oil (see Exodus 29:9; 1 Kings 19:15-16). And these anointings included more than just a few drops on the recipient's head. Psalm 133 describes the anointing oil as "running down on the beard" and dripping onto the collar of a person's robe. This picture

describes something of the lavish blessing and equipping that God bestows on his dedicated servants.

When David says his cup overflows, he is referring to the lavishness of the shepherd's care and protection. The psalmist is overwhelmed by the goodness of God, despite the foolishness and wandering of his beloved sheep.

In what ways are you experiencing God's lavish care?

Generous Shepherd, fill our minds and hearts with memories of the many ways you care for and provide for us, watching over us always. We are grateful for the lavish abundance of your care. Amen.

ELEVATED SHEEP

You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.
—Psalm 8:5

Earlier this month (July 2) I mentioned that I wasn't so sure I liked being compared to a sheep, as in Psalm 23. But even though it's not very flattering for us to be called sheep, we can be assured that the Lord our shepherd dearly loves and treasures us.

Psalm 8, which is also attributed to David, reminds us that God values us human beings so highly that he has "crowned [us] with glory and honor." At creation we were anointed with glory and commissioned to the important work of partnering with God in caring for and tending to his creation. We have been given a high calling, and in order to live into that calling we are best served by following our Lord and shepherd well.

Just as the Lord's leadership blesses us and guides us into flourishing, we are invited to

do the same with all of creation and all the creatures and people we engage with. To others who may feel lost, alone, or abandoned, we have the opportunity to extend the great care that our shepherd has given us.

How does the truth of your own high calling affect how you will live today?

Lord, help us today and every day to live into the great calling you have placed on our lives. Fill us with your love and care, we pray, and surround us with other followers of your way who can support and encourage us. Amen.

ANOINTED SHEEP

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. . . .
—1 Peter 2:9

Remembering that priests and prophets and kings were anointed as confirmation of their special callings, we need to take our calling as God's sheep seriously. The apostle Peter points out the high calling that is on our lives as "the people of God." We are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, . . . God's special possession." Called to kingly and queenly service, we are to lead in the same manner as the great high King, the Lord Almighty. We are to radiate God's excellent attributes to the world through our leadership as parents, in our workplaces, in our communities, and everywhere else.

As priests, we are called to pray for a broken world, bringing that brokenness to the one who can heal. Priests also represent God to the world and invite people who don't recognize the shepherd to gain a

glimpse of his love and mercy in our own lives.

Peter also uses the word holy, meaning that we are set apart for this valuable work for the sake of the Lord's lost sheep. Our purpose in all of this is to share with others the good news and the great works of the Lord who has called us "out of darkness into his wonderful light." Each one of us is a living picture of the shepherd's mercy and grace, equipped to invite others to the best way to live.

What is one concrete way in which you can live into your high calling today?

Lord, help us to radiate your goodness in the world. By our words and actions may we reflect the light of your love. Amen.

JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. . . ."
—John 10:14

When Jesus, the Son of God, came to live and teach among us, he picked up on the imagery of Psalm 23 and told all who would hear, "I am the good shepherd." Jesus came to us as the Lord God in the flesh, declaring that he was there to shepherd God's people and lead them home to the Father. He moved into our world, our neighborhood, and reminded everyone of what the Lord our shepherd had been doing all along: guiding us, pursuing us, and calling us back to him. The Lord's sheep began to recognize God in his Son and to follow him.

Jesus made a strong connection to the work that his Father had already been doing, highlighting that his close relationship with the Father informed how he would save, guard, and protect the Lord's sheep.

When we read the accounts of Jesus' life and ministry in the Bible, we see Jesus gathering his flock, walking among God's people, and getting to know them. He teaches them and models what it looks like to do the will of his Father so that they can live God's way as well. Like the shepherd in Psalm 23, he lives among God's sheep and leads them to the one thing they need: a renewed relationship with the Lord, who calls them to live in abundance and full life forever with him.

In what ways have you found that the good shepherd knows you?

Lord Jesus, thank you for showing us God's love and how to live for him. May we hear your voice in your Word and by your Spirit. Amen.

JESUS, THE GOOD SHEPHERD

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."
—John 10:11

Jesus makes clear that his work is much more than a job to do. He has real skin in the game. He is not playing at caring for the Lord's sheep until something better comes along. Jesus is the gate that any poacher or corrupting force would have to pass through to get to the Lord's sheep—and because of his deep love for us, he is willing to die on our behalf in order to bring us back home to his Father.

This is Jesus' mission. The sheep and the good shepherd are completely connected to each other. As Romans 8:39 tells us, nothing can "separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Jesus doesn't feel put upon to carry out this mission for the Father; he and the Father are of one mind, both driven by a shared love for the sheep.

Jesus the Son gave up his privilege in heaven, emptying himself to come and invite us back into a relationship with God our Father and Creator (Philippians 2:6-8). What an amazing sacrifice! And this is amplified by Jesus' willingness to lay down his life for us so that we can be saved. This is amazing grace! This is abounding love!

How can you thank God for this astonishing gift today?

We thank you, Jesus, for your sacrificial love. Thank you that nothing can separate us from you. Help us to live boldly into this gracious truth. Amen.

IN THE PRESENCE OF HIS ENEMIES

While they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."
—Matthew 26:21

The patience and generosity Jesus shows as he prepares for his last supper with his disciples is really awe inspiring. Without anger or malice he tells the truth of what is about to happen. He not only sets a table in front of an enemy but also serves that enemy. This too is amazing grace.

The good shepherd feeds his sheep both physically and spiritually with a meal (the Lord's Supper) that the flock will eat in remembrance of his sacrifice and love for years and years to come. It will nourish them spiritually so that they will have what they need to stay on mission. And even in underground churches to the present day his sheep have joined in this meal despite being surrounded by enemies.

Humanly speaking it would not have been easy to think about the sheep in his care as

Jesus set his face toward the cross and he became the sacrifice for sin for the sake of all who would follow him. But while Jesus was fully human, he was also fully the Son of God who continued to care for his flock even as he faced death on their behalf. Here we see his overwhelming love for both the Father and the flock, including any who opposed him.

We are called to live and act like Jesus. How does his example of showing love to both his faithful followers and his enemies inform how we can engage with people who are unkind to us?

We praise you, Lord Jesus, for your undying love shown to us in so many ways as you walked toward your death for our sake. Amen.

CARING THROUGH THE END

When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." —John 19:26-27

Here we see the good shepherd so near to the end of his life and in so much pain that we would certainly understand if he focused only on his own suffering. But he doesn't resign from his duties.

In our reading for today the gentle shepherd is moved by compassion for his mother, Mary. In a final act of honor for her care, Jesus ensures that she will not be left homeless and vulnerable. He commissions his dear disciple John to take Mary into his household.

The gospel account of Luke shows, as well, how Jesus responds to the prayer of a convicted criminal who is dying next to him. He blesses the man with forgiveness and with the promise of life in paradise (Luke 22:39-43). The Lord our shepherd continues to pursue the lost and the wandering even as he faces his own cruel death.

These incidents show us that taking care of his Father's sheep was Jesus' passion. Jesus walks with them through the valley of the shadow of his own death.

What wonderful love this is! Death and the tomb cannot contain it. The passage of thousands of years beyond his resurrection and return to heaven cannot dull such love. This is good news for us all.

Where in your life have you encountered the good shepherd's love?

Lord Jesus, we cannot thank you enough for your loving sacrifice for us. Help us to honor you in all we do as we seek to extend your care and love to the world. Amen.

LOST SHEEP RETRIEVED

As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them. . . .

—Luke 24:15

One of the more poignant places where Jesus shows up as the good shepherd is when he goes after two despondent, lost sheep on the road to Emmaus. Jesus meets these two followers in their grief and invites them to tell their story, processing their disappointment. Jesus' very presence with them reminds them that they still belong to him and are part of his sheepfold, in spite of their doubts and confusion. He literally walks with them in the valley of the shadow of his own death.

The good shepherd is a pursuer. These sheep are on their own, vulnerable, lost, and in need of their shepherd's care. They are not abandoned to their misconceptions of current events. Jesus seeks them out and tends to them as only he can.

This story serves as a comforting reminder to any of us who may be facing doubts or disappointment with God. Maybe we have had to adjust our understanding of how God is working in our lives, or maybe we feel unworthy of the shepherd's care because we have wandered away. This picture of Jesus underscores his love for us and our worth to him as his beloved sheep.

In what ways does this story bring you comfort today?

When we feel lost and alone, Lord, open our eyes to your very real presence in our lives. Give us glimpses of your presence and work all around us. Amen.

LOST SHEEP BLINDED

... Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.
—Luke 24:15-16

Does it seem unfair that these disciples were kept from seeing Jesus? I have heard people say that it seems Jesus was being tricky here. While Jesus walks along with them, the disciples think he is an out of touch stranger who has no idea what happened recently in Jerusalem.

But let's look at this from a different angle. From a teaching and learning perspective, Jesus makes a brilliant move. The disciples do not know Jesus is right there with him, so they can express their misunderstanding and frustration without being distracted. They have no need to try to act as they would if they knew he was there. They have room to hear God's story all over again and to begin learning anew.

We learn that they also asked each other later, "Were not our hearts burning within us

as he talked with us . . . ?" Somewhere deep inside they sensed that their fellow traveler had remarkable understanding and authority as he spoke about the Scriptures, but first they needed to be in a space where they could be redirected. Jesus their shepherd had more than one agenda to attend to in order for them to grow as disciples who would be invited to share in his mission. While not being able to recognize him, they could begin to develop spiritual eyes of faith by which all new disciples would begin to see him.

How has the good shepherd gotten your attention lately? What is he trying to teach you?

Lord, help us to learn anew and to be more attentive so that we can see you at work in the world today. Amen.

LOST SHEEP RE-EDUCATED

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

—Luke 24:27

The two disciples from Emmaus needed to be reminded that they belonged to Jesus. They were like lost and confused sheep that couldn't articulate what they were feeling. They also needed to hear the Lord's story again in all of its beautiful simplicity and complexity. Like a good teacher, Jesus retaught his students so that they would be well prepared to tell his good-news story to others.

While Jesus' closest disciples hid from the authorities who had arrested and sentenced him, these two sheep had fled for the distant safety of their home in Emmaus. Thinking that Jesus was a stranger, they shared about their trauma and disappointment with their shepherd, and he helped them make sense of recent events by rooting his death and resurrection in all the Scriptures

had said about him. Jesus gave them the Word to feast on, despite their doubts and fears and the threats of their enemies.

The disciples' encounter with the living Word and what the Scriptures said about him changed their lives forever. We are reminded that we too need to know God's big story so that we can make sense of how God keeps working in his world today. It can be easy to be overwhelmed by surprising, chaotic events and forget God's promises, invitations, and commands to us today.

How have you responded to the Lord's invitation to feast on his Word today?

Lord, thank you for your Word, and help us to feast on it daily. Amen.

SHEEP ON A MISSION

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. . . . Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. —Luke 24:33-35

The news about Jesus was too important for the disciples in Emmaus to keep to themselves! Isn't it interesting that these disciples "returned at once to Jerusalem" to tell the others about their meeting with Jesus? A little while earlier, they had urged Jesus to stay with them because it would soon be dark—and generally too dangerous to travel. But now they rushed back to Jerusalem, seemingly without a care for their own safety. These disciples could not contain their excitement to tell the good news about Jesus. They were no longer victims of a terrible loss; they were disciples on a mission.

They realized that their calling was to confirm the teaching of the Scriptures about Jesus and to bear witness about the resurrected Jesus to others who were feeling lost and defeated.

They brought to the other disciples the same encouragement, comfort, and grace that they had received.

When we think of ourselves as part of Jesus' sheepfold, it can be easy to think that we have been invited to be passive followers. What we see in the Emmaus disciples' response is that we too are invited to partner with Jesus.

We are called to tell the world that God loves everyone so much that he continues to seek all who are lost so that they can come home where they belong.

Who in your midst needs to hear this good news?

Lord, give us courage and energy to share your good news with all who need to hear it. Amen.

HOPE-FILLED SHEEP

"It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon."

—Luke 24:34

Buoyed by a renewed understanding of Jesus' mission and their calling to tell others, all of the disciples found renewed hope. They shared stories among themselves of other encounters with the risen Lord, and their joy and confidence grew. Hope was the very thing these sheep needed, and Jesus provided it in abundance (see also vv. 36-49).

Hope is powerful. It sustained the disciples well into the future. It comforted them when Jesus returned to heaven (Luke 24:50-53). And with the coming of the Spirit, it propelled them into new places and fortified them when they faced persecution (Acts 2-8).

These sheep could declare with the writer of Psalm 23 that they lacked nothing. Jesus provided all that was needed to anchor and build their faith. They regained confidence that

they belonged to him and to each other. They had renewed knowledge that God faithfully keeps working in the world. They also had a renewed sense of calling to be on mission with God as they continued working and waiting in hope for Jesus' return.

We can declare the same. The shepherd continues to form our faith. And like the early disciples who shared testimonies of their encounters with the living Jesus, we are invited to give witness to our own encounters with Jesus today.

With whom can you share stories about the Lord's work in your life?

Lord, help us to encourage one another by sharing about the ways we have seen you working in our lives and in the world around us. Amen.

SPIRIT-LED SHEEP

"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

—John 14:18

One of the hardest things for the disciples to grasp was how Jesus could continue to shepherd them after he returned to be with the Father. So Jesus prepared them ahead of time for that transition. He told them that the Father would send the Holy Spirit to be in each one of them. They would always have a comforter and advocate to guide them, reminding them of Jesus' teachings and giving them peace.

Jesus tells us that "the Spirit of truth" will teach us and remind us of all that Jesus has taught because he knows that his physical absence will make us forgetful. Jesus knows that we have to grow used to seeing him with spiritual eyes. As we keep his commands and learn from his Word, the Spirit will fulfill God's promise to love and care for all who follow him.

The Spirit will comfort us with peace as we go through the valley of shadow. The Spirit will advocate for us, serving as our supporter, protector, and champion. The Spirit will advise us and uphold us as we journey with Jesus.

Jesus, the good shepherd, continues to be present among us through the Spirit even as he prays for us and upholds us while ruling beside the Father in heaven today.

Where have you experienced Jesus' presence in your life lately?

Lord, thank you for sending your Holy Spirit to guide us from within. Help us to listen for the Spirit's voice and to respond with trust and obedience to the Spirit's leading. Amen.

GRACE-FILLED SHEEP

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

—Psalm 23:6

Looking again at Psalm 23, we can see that the Lord our shepherd is not like a cowboy chasing us to move us along or dragging us along by a rope. Our shepherd walks ahead of us and among us—and if we are wandering, he goes out searching for us to draw us back in. His love, goodness, grace, and mercy surround us. We don't have to go chasing after the shepherd's love and care. It is always there because Jesus is always there. Grace pursues us. It is not something we have to earn; nor is it something we have to prove we deserve. It is freely given from the giver of all good gifts.

Psalm 23 begins and ends with notes of gratitude. We have everything we need—so much, in fact, that it overflows to everyone in our midst. We can't contain it. The psalm writer's thought here is that wherever

we are present, grace should abound. It should have a ripple effect in our relationships with others.

Goodness and mercy not only follow us; we share these blessings with others and leave them behind as we move along. When we follow the shepherd well and lean into our calling as sheep, we take the blessings we receive and bless others, who in turn are able to bless still others, and so on.

Lord, we want to honor you by being a blessing in our families and communities. Make us attentive to the needs of others and open to coming alongside people who need to experience your presence in us. Amen.

FRUITFUL SHEEP

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

—Galatians 5:22-23

My mother used to advise me and my sisters to leave a place better than we found it.

What might that look like for followers of the good shepherd? What evidence might there be that one of Jesus' sheep has been in the area? Paul, who wrote Galatians, lists some attributes and behaviors that ought to be noticeable in Jesus' sheep.

As the Holy Spirit shepherds us from within, we grow to reflect the Spirit's presence within us. We begin to radiate the character and attributes of Jesus. As he treats us with gentleness, patience, and kindness, these attributes begin to flow out from us to others. The goodness, love, and peace that we experience in his constant companionship overflow to others as well.

Jesus' sheep are anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit and, as Psalm 23 puts it, our cups overflow. Anyone we meet can be a recipient, and everywhere we go can be a veritable splash zone of God's goodness, which is so attractive that others want to share in it too. We need to pray that we reflect the Lord's attributes faithfully, because we know we are still tempted to wander and to hoard and squander the goodness that the shepherd gives us.

Where is the Spirit inviting you to share his presence today?

Spirit of God, help us to bear your fruit as you work faithfully within us, aiming to bless others with Jesus' love wherever we go. Amen.

HOMEBOODY SHEEP

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

—Psalm 23:6

Most cultures have a word for that feeling we all get when we experience being home. It includes a sense of safety and warmth and even coziness and intimacy. We all long for these things. If we didn't have these in the setting we grew up in, perhaps we could find them in the home of a friend or in a group of caring friends or in the wonder of God's creation. Home is where we can let down our guard and be ourselves.

The psalm writer affirms that he feels at home "in the house of LORD"—and that has to do with the presence of the Lord. So home is wherever the Lord his shepherd is present. In this sense home is experienced more in relationship than in terms of place. Home is not restricted to time or space. The one who made us and shaped us and knows our name is home to us.

Following the shepherd is where we belong, and this includes being with the Lord's other sheep. The shepherd even searches out his sheep who might leave the fold because he knows he can care for them best.

In today's world there are so many people who feel lonely and isolated. They long for home. And those who know the shepherd can point out the way, confident that the lost and lonely will be received with joy!

In what ways is the shepherd nudging you to extend someone an invitation home today?

Lord, we are so grateful that we belong to you and your flock, your church. Help us to extend your love to all who need the home that only you can provide. Amen.

HOMEGOING SHEEP

I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

—Psalm 23:6

Forever is a long time. And most of us are not fans of waiting. Sometimes even TV ads between our favorite shows can seem unending.

When we think about it, forever can seem intimidating or overwhelming. So it can help to think about this in connection with relationships. Relationships with family members often stand the test of time, and yet today a 35-year marriage can seem like a rare treasure. In our mobile and divisive culture today, a 46-year friendship may also be less common than in the past.

The psalm writer wants the Lord's sheep to know that the good shepherd will never let us go. This is a comfort that can carry us through the ups and downs of challenging relationships in the here and now.

We can also think of forever in terms of location. Many of

us sheep are pretty happy with the life we have here on earth. We are often able to find places we enjoy for beauty and bliss, and it can be hard to imagine anything better because this is all we know.

But the psalmist reminds us that the shepherd may call us to move along to other pastures—and yet that may mean going through tough passageways and dark valleys at times. Being in a loving relationship with the good shepherd will keep us calm, though, and eventually we'll move on to new pastures in a new heaven and earth, where we will live with him forever.

How does this promise encourage you today?

Lord, help us to trust in you, knowing that you are with us now and forever. Amen.

CONFIDENT SHEEP

The LORD is my shepherd. . . .

—Psalm 23:1

When the psalm writer wrote this beautiful song, he may well have been thinking of the Lord's guiding hand throughout the history of his people Israel.

God had called the people's forefathers, promising to be their God and to bless them and their descendants (Genesis 12-35). God had freed the people from slavery in Egypt, guiding them faithfully through desert wastelands to the promised land of Canaan (Exodus 3 - Joshua 24), where they became established as his covenant people—and where David, the psalmist himself, set up Jerusalem as the center where God would be worshiped (2 Samuel 5-7).

And when Jesus, the Son of God, came to live and teach among us, he picked up on the beautiful themes of this psalm to announce that he is the good

shepherd who will always care for God's sheep, calling all who will follow him to have eternal life in his name (John 10). Jesus also introduced his followers to the coming of the Holy Spirit, who lives in us today, filling us with God's presence and teaching us to live like Jesus (John 14-16).

Throughout history the faithful Lord our shepherd has made himself known to us, seeking us out when we were lost, and calling us to follow him and have life to the full.

As we journey with the shepherd, may we be confident in his faithful care and inspired to participate in his grace for all whom he calls to his fold.

Lord, continue to bless and keep us as you shine your face on us and give us your peace. Amen.



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