



## Sermon by Synod Minister Heather Culuris

July 21, 2024

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### Psalm: Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. (Ps. 23:1)*

<sup>1</sup> The LORD<sup>1</sup> is my shepherd;

I shall not<sup>1</sup> be in want.

<sup>2</sup> **The LORD makes me lie down<sup>1</sup> in green pastures  
and leads me be-<sup>1</sup>side still waters.**

<sup>3</sup> You restore my<sup>1</sup> soul, O LORD,  
and guide me along right pathways<sup>1</sup> for your name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> **Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall<sup>1</sup> fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they<sup>1</sup> comfort me.**

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence<sup>1</sup> of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is<sup>1</sup> running over.

<sup>6</sup> **Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days<sup>1</sup> of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the<sup>1</sup> LORD forever.**

### Sermon:

This morning as we gather for worship and we hear the witness of Scripture, we read together Psalm 23 that proclaims in its very first line that the Lord is our Shepherd. The Lord is our Shepherd, we proclaimed together. This ancient image of God as our Shepherd has been a powerful one for Christians and our Jewish sisters and brother throughout the generations and is still powerful for us today.

As we think about how God is our Shepherd, this morning, I'd like to share a story with you about another shepherd, Patsy the border Collie. Now, Patsy the Border Collie was a

6-year-old kelpie-border collie mix from a small farming and ranching community in Victoria, Australia, who has become so famous that she has her own Instagram account. What made her so famous, you might wonder? During the massive wildfires in Australia back in 2020, Patsy became a hero for helping to save a flock of sheep on her family farm from the dangerous fires. This is Patsy's story:

As the fires came close to her family's farm, Patsy worked with her owner to save 900 sheep, bringing them to safety. Her owner's sister tells the story this way: "For Patsy, funnily enough the fires don't really make much of a difference!!! She's a border collie/kelpie cross, so she's a working dog through and through. These dogs have been bred for generations to develop their ability to work with sheep and cattle on farms, and they are very intelligent and resilient animals. They love to work, it's just what they are bred to do, and they can be very focused and single-minded on the job! So when my brother needed Patsy to help bring the sheep into safety, that's exactly what she did. She just got on with her job and did it, regardless of the conditions. Cool, calm, and collected." As her owner used a tractor equipped with a water tank to keep the flames that crept close to the property at bay, Patsy got to work. She gathered up the farm's flock of 900 sheep and led them through smoke and ash safely to a sheltered paddock away from the fire. Patsy stayed with the sheep through the fire, guiding them and protecting them. Working together as a team, the Patsy and her owner managed to save all but a handful of the animals, as well as all of the buildings on the property except for a few sheds.

Indeed, as we think about God as our Shepherd, this story of Patsy the Border Collie in Australia helps me think about what it means that God is our Shepherd. Both Psalm 23 and Patsy's story, remind us how much a shepherd cares for and protects the sheep. We know that in the ancient world, shepherds lived out in the wilderness with their herds of sheep and maybe one or two companions. Their job was to care for the sheep, to make sure the sheep were protected, 24/7, night and day. In Psalm 23, we hear about how the shepherd leads the flock by still waters, provides overflowing banquets for the flock, and guides their pathways. Psalm 23 says:

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." In John's Gospel, when Jesus says he is the Good Shepherd, we

hear similar things as Jesus teaches about how the sheep follow the voice of the shepherd, because they know the shepherd's voice, because the shepherd has been with them and has cared for them, as Jesus says, giving life abundantly. The Shepherd is with the sheep, that is what a shepherd does.

From reading other Psalms in worship and maybe in our personal devotions, we know that Psalm 23 is not the shortest of the psalms, but it is relatively brief. It's not as short as Psalm 117 that only has 17 Hebrew words. It is also definitely not as long as Psalm 119 that has 1065 Hebrew words! Psalm 23 has 55 Hebrew words in it. Remember that the Psalm we know is a translation from the original Hebrew Psalm, a Psalm that Jesus himself would have prayed. But here is the fascinating part of Psalm 23 for me: At the heart of Psalm 23 are the words, "For you are with me." There are exactly 26 Hebrew words before that phrase, and exactly 26 words after it. The very center of the Psalm is meant to remind us of the most important part of what we believe about God. God is with us. The very heart of the Psalm points us to the center and heart of our faith: God is with us.

Other passages throughout Scripture remind us also that God is with us. Remember Isaiah Chapter 43:

But now, this is what the Lord says—

he who created you, Jacob,

he who formed you, Israel:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.

And then we have Jesus Matthew 28 reminding his disciples that he would always be with them, saying:

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

We as God's people need this reminder that God is our Shepherd and that God is always with us. Through the joys and sorrows of our daily lives, God is with us. In the times in our lives when we make big decisions that shape our futures, God is with us. When we need someone to lean on, God is with us.

God is with us in so many ways. In the bread and wine of communion, in the waters of baptism that claim us as God's children. God is with us in the prayers of our faith communities and our friends. God is with us in the care we show one another. God is with us in the hospitality that we extend to a neighbor. God is with us in the beauty of creation all around us in these summer days. God is with us.

This week, take Psalm 23 home with you to pray about and reflect on. Read it as you begin your day or before you go to sleep at night. Then name each day ways that you have seen God present, with you, each day. Notice God's presence all around you and with you. Amen.