Psalm 23:1 *Walking with the Shepherd: MY Shepherd*

***Mr. Boeyink***I graduated from Floyd Valley High School in Alton, Iowa in 1990. The next year our school district merged with the Maurice-Orange City school district. So my class, which Pastor Jay was also a part of, was the last class to graduate from Floyd Valley. There are a few other people in our congregation who went to Floyd Valley as well.

And if you went to Floyd Valley in the ‘80s, then you had an English teacher named Joel Boeyink. Mr. Boeyink was an interesting fellow. He was balding, he had a mustache, he was an avid pheasant hunter, he absolutely adored Tootsie Pops, and he loved to tell Dumb Dutchman jokes.

For instance: “Have you heard about the football game between the Dutch and the Germans? They played next to a rail line. It was zero-zero in the third quarter when a train went by. The Germans heard the train whistle and assumed the game was over, so they left the field. Midway through the fourth quarter, the Dutch scored the winning touchdown.”

Or this one: “A Frenchman, an Englishman, and a Dutchman were in the city where the Olympics were being held, but they didn’t have tickets. Then the Frenchmen got an idea. He went to a hardware store and bought a large hammer. Then he went to the athlete’s entrance to the stadium and started to walk in. When the security guard stopped him, he held up his hammer and said: ‘I’m an athlete, I’m in the hammer throw.’ The security guard let him in.

“The Englishman saw this, and was impressed. So he goes to the hardware store and buys a large pole. When the security guard stops him, he says: ‘I’m an athlete. Pole vaulter.’ And the guard lets him in.

“The Dutchman has seen both the Frenchman and the Englishman get in, and he’s very impressed. So he goes to the hardware store and buys a bunch of barbed wire, which he proceeds to wrap all around himself. When he gets to the athlete entrance, the guard says: ‘Whoa! Wait a minute! What sort of sport are you in?’ And the Dutchman gestures at the barbed wire and says: ‘Fencing!’”

As you can tell, Mr. Boeyink’s jokes made quite an impression on me. But he also taught me quite a bit about grammar and writing. In particular, I remember the lessons on figurative language. It was Mr. Boeyink who taught me the difference between a simile and a metaphor. A simile makes a comparison between two different things using the words “like” or “as.” A metaphor, on the other hand, makes a comparison between two unlike things without the words “like” or “as.” So, for example, “The children sounded like a herd of elephants running down the hallway” is a simile. “The children were a herd of elephants running down the hallway” is a metaphor.

And metaphors are important parts of human language. We frequently express ourselves by comparing one thing to another. Instead of taking the time to explain that the fog was thick and hard to see through, we might say that it was a “pea soup fog.” Instead of saying that a leader was brave and strong and courageous, we might say that he was a “lion.” Obviously, you can’t take a spoon and eat the fog, and the leader doesn’t have fur and claws and insanely sharp teeth; but the metaphors provide descriptors that are interesting and expressive and often convey more than straightforward words can.

We often use metaphors to make difficult concepts a little easier to understand. In that sense, metaphors are important for helping us to understand God. The Bible uses many metaphors to convey information about what God is like and how He relates to us. For instance, God is a Rock. Jesus is the light of the world. God is the potter and we are the clay. And so on.

One of the best-known metaphors for God in the Bible, and probably one of the best-loved, is “the LORD is my shepherd.” It’s the first line of Psalm 23, also known as the Shepherd Psalm. It is a passage of scripture which is a favorite of many people. Both BibleGateway.com and BibleStudy.com list Psalm 23 as one of the most searched for passages of the Bible (along with John 3:16, 1 Corinthians 13, Jeremiah 29:11, and Philippians 4:13)

Psalm 23 is going to be subject of our next sermon series. For the next six weeks or so, we are going to explore this famous metaphor, the Lord is my shepherd. Let’s start by reading the Psalm. And to do that, I’m going to **put it up on the screen** and invite you to read it with me:

**1**The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
**2**    He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
**3**    he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
    for his name’s sake.
**4**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.

**5**You prepare a table before me
    in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
    my cup overflows.
**6**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.

If you haven’t already, this is a good passage to commit to memory. One of my goals for this series is that we will recite it together every week.

You’ll also notice that there are 6 verses, so we are going to do a six-week series with a sermon on each verse.

And we start with verse one. The metaphor. **“The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”** There are three points I want to make about this metaphor.

***Not a Compliment***The first thing I want to consider with this metaphor is what it says about us. If the Lord is our shepherd, then that means **we are being compared to sheep.** And that is not a compliment.

You get that, right? This is such an important metaphor in the Bible that it gets repeated dozens, if not hundreds of times. The Bible is constantly comparing people to sheep. And part of that is because sheep were such an integral part of that culture.

We live in rural Iowa, so we probably get this on some level. Certainly better than people who have lived in large, modern cities their whole lives. At least we have a concept of what our meat looks like before it gets wrapped in shrink wrap and put in a cooler at the grocery store. But we’re not really sheep country. And most of the sheep we do see are in 4-H pens at the Clay County Fair.

But for David, who wrote this Psalm, and spent his childhood years tending his father’s sheep; and for the rest of the people in the Middle East, sheep were all around them. And they didn’t just keep their flocks in pens on the family homestead; sheep needed to be led out to grazing and watched over and protected from predators and thieves.

So for the people of the Bible, the sheep metaphor would have been easy to grasp, and they would have known, instinctively, that being compared to sheep was not a compliment.

Sheep are **dependent.** When the Bible compares us to sheep, that’s one of the things it is getting at. Sheep need constant care and provision.

In Matthew 9, after Jesus has been teaching and preaching and healing every disease and sickness, He’s tired. He’s ready for a break. But then he sees the crowds that keep coming, and **Matthew says this:**

**36**When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

“Harrassed and helpless.” That’s the image that comes to mind when we are compared to sheep.

Sheep cannot provide for themselves. They need to be led to good grazing ground, they need to be led to water. Sheep will stay in the same place, grazing on the same ground until there is nothing left to eat, and then they don’t know where to go. They have been known to drink contaminated water—water that other animals have polluted—because they aren’t bright enough to find fresh water. They’ll keep going to poisoned streams until it kills them.

Sheep can lose their sense of balance, fall over, and not be able to get back up again– because they can't figure out how. It's not that they don't have the ability to stand up, with weak knees or something, they just can't always figure out how to shift their center of gravity again to get their legs under them.

Sheep, if not tended, can walk right into a fire. And not be able to get out of it because they are so bewildered. They can walk right into a fire and stay there and cook unless someone helps them.

Sheep, in a word, are dependent. They need to be cared for.

And that’s what this metaphor is saying about us. We are like sheep—harassed and helpless and needy in every way.

Or, again, when the Bible calls us sheep it is talking about our tendency to **get lost.** Sheep have a tendency to wander off, to get separated from the flock, and when they do, they can’t find their way back home.

This was something that David and other people in the Bible knew so well. A lost sheep was a doomed sheep. Shepherds know that sometimes sheep would go off on their own, and when they did, they were in big trouble.

**Isaiah 53:6** uses the metaphor like this:

**6**We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
    each of us has turned to our own way;

The third verse of “Come Thou Fount” puts it like this:

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;

When the Bible compares us to sheep, this is what it is saying about us: We get lost. We wander. We go astray.

Or, again, sheep are **weak**.

Think about it: nobody gets a tattoo of a sheep to show how tough they are! If you’ve been hitting the gym, you’ve been working to really build up the old biceps, and you want to get a little ink to accentuate that fact, you are not going to choose a fuzzy little lamb. You get a snake, or a lion, or a dragon, or some such thing, but not a sheep.

Because sheep are finely tuned to be nature’s perfect victim. They have no defense. The predators for sheep are just about everything: lions, bears, wolves, hyenas, small dogs, large birds, even bugs. Sheep have been known to be so bothered by flies that they will beat their heads against a tree until they die.

Sheep have no claws, no teeth, they can’t run fast, they can’t climb a tree, they don’t have an intimidating roar to scare predators off. I mean, a lion creeps up on a sheep and what can it say? “Baaa?” It pretty much sounds like an invitation to eat me.

So when the Bible compares us to sheep, one thing that it is saying is that we are weak and defenseless. Listen to what Jesus says to His disciples when he is preparing to send them out on their first mission assignment in **Matthew 10:16:**

**16**“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.”

That’s not confidence inspiring. Sheep are in constant danger. If we are sheep, then we need someone to protect us.

So the first thing I want us to get from this metaphor is that we are being compared to sheep. We are dependent, we tend to get lost, and we are weak,

***The Good Shepherd***Now, let’s go back to our main verse. Psalm 23:1 “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.” Let’s talk about what the shepherd metaphor says about the LORD. How does the **shepherd metaphor help us to understand God?**

As I said, there are a lot of verses in the Bible comparing us to sheep, and there are also many that compare God to a shepherd. Let’s consider some verses which answer our greatest needs as sheep.

We said that as sheep, we are dependent. Sheep without a shepherd are harassed and helpless. We need, then, a shepherd who will **provide** for us.

This is really what the rest of Psalm 23 is about. He maketh me lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside quiet waters. The imagery of the Psalm is about how the Lord meets our needs. But there are other verses in the Bible which convey the same idea. Consider Isaiah **40:10-11:**

**10**See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
    and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
    and his recompense accompanies him.
**11**He tends his flock like a shepherd:
    He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
    he gently leads those that have young.

I love these verses because they create two pictures of God that we would normally think would be opposed to each other. In verse 10, God is pictured as a mighty warrior. A ripped hero with arms like Dwayne Johnson and a powerful sword to cut down any who oppose Him. But in verse 11 he’s pictured as a shepherd who tenderly cradles lambs in his arms and holds them close to his chest. The mighty warrior is also a gentle caretaker.

And it is that compassion and care and personal attention that the Shepherd metaphor conveys. Shepherds know their sheep. In that culture, especially, a shepherd would spend 24 hours a day with his flock, and he could identify each sheep by name. Where you and I would just see a mass of indistinguishable white and fuzzy animals, a shepherd would know each beast and its needs, its habits, its personality. A shepherd can tell at a glance if a sheep is walking funny or running a fever or whatever.

And that’s what the Shepherd metaphor says about God. He knows us. He knows us individually. In a world of 8 billion people, He knows each of us by name. He watches over us in such a way that not a hair can fall from our heads without His awareness. By identifying as our shepherd, He wants us to know that we are the special objects of His attention and affection.

Another thing the shepherd metaphor says about God is that He **seeks us**. As sheep, we tend to get lost. We are prone to wander. As a shepherd, God comes to find us.

**Luke 15:4-6**, Jesus says:

**4**“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? **5**And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders **6**and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’

In Jesus’ parable, the shepherd clearly represents Him. He’s the one who seeks for the lost sheep. He’s the one who comes to earth looking for us. He’s the one who rejoices when the missing lamb is found.

That’s what a good shepherd does. That’s what the shepherd metaphor says about God.

Or, again, we said that as sheep we are weak. We are vulnerable. There are predators out there that want harm and destroy us. What we need, then, is a shepherd who will **protect us.**

This, too, is what the metaphor is getting at. In the story of David and Goliath, when King Saul doubts David’s ability to fight the giant, it is his experience as a shepherd that David refers to. He tells Saul that when the lion and the bear attacked his flocks, he would go after them and strike them down. As a shepherd, it was his job to protect the sheep.

In the same way, Jesus talks about Himself as the Good Shepherd in John 10. He says something that seems a little unusual to us, but would have made perfect sense in that culture. **John 10:7:**

**7**Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.”

It seems like a mixing of metaphors, from shepherd to gate. But it would have made perfect sense. What Jesus was talking about was the way shepherds would confine their sheep at night. They’d find a box canyon, or a hedgerow, and put their sheep into it for the night. Then they’d lay themselves down in the opening. They’d literally make themselves the gate, at the only place you could get in or out of the pen. So anyone or anything that wanted to get to the sheep would have to go through the shepherd first. In this way they would protect their flock.

Which also makes sense of what Jesus says just a few verses later. **John 10:14-15**:

**14**“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—**15**just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

As the good shepherd, Jesus was willing to lay his life on the line for the sheep. Just as David was willing to pursue the lion in order to protect the lamb, just as ancient shepherds made their own bodies into the wall protecting their flocks, Jesus was willing to lay down His life for us.

This is clearly a foreshadowing of the cross, and Jesus’ willingness to die in place of us. As a shepherd, God was willing to sacrifice His own son for the protection of the sheep. Jesus took up the cross to pay the penalty of our sins. The verse in Isaiah that says “we all, like sheep, have gone astray” also says that “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isa. 53:6)

That’s what it means for God to be our shepherd. He provides for us when we are too harassed and helpless to care for ourselves. He seeks us out when we are lost and wandering. And He protects us when we are weak. He lays His life on the line for us.

He calls us by name, finds us when we stray, and buys us with His own blood.

***MY Shepherd***Now, third observation: **we need to see the importance of the word “my.”** Let’s put the key verse up one more time: **Psalm 23:1: “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”**

This doesn’t say that the LORD is a shepherd. It doesn’t even say that he is THE shepherd. Rather, David makes it personal. He says the LORD is “my” shepherd. He owns the relationship. Or, more precisely, he knows who owns him.

I think this might be one of the reasons this is such a popular Psalm, such a popular metaphor. When we recite this Psalm, we are making a personal declaration: “The LORD is my shepherd. I am a sheep of His flock.” The whole Psalm is personal like that. “He makes me lie down.” “He leads me.” “He restores my soul.” “Even though I walk through valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” The Psalm is about having a personal relationship with the King of kings and the Lord of lords. It’s a shepherd/sheep relationship.

So the question is: can you say this with David? Can you say, the Lord is MY shepherd? I see two things implied in that word “my.”

One is **surrender.** When we say that the LORD is my shepherd, that means we are acknowledging His leadership in our lives. We’re acknowledging that we are, indeed, sheep; and that we would be helpless, lost and vulnerable without a shepherd to guide us.

We are saying that we need a shepherd, and that the Lord is the shepherd we have chosen. That we’ve surrendered ourselves to His control. That means that we have given up on trying to shepherd our own lives, and that we are prepared to follow Him.

Almost 50 years ago a man named Philip Keller wrote a little book called “A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23.” He wrote this:

Basically, what it amounts to is this: A person exchanges the fickle fortunes of living life by sheer whimsy for the more productive and satisfying adventure of being guided by God.

It is a tragic truth that many people who really have never come under His direction or management claim that “The Lord is my Shepherd.” They seem to hope that by merely admitting that He is their Shepherd somehow they will enjoy the benefits of His care and management without paying the price of forfeiting their own fickle and foolish way of life.

One cannot have it both ways. Either we belong or we don’t…It is a most serious and sobering thought which should make us search our own hearts and motives and personal relationship to Himself.

Do I really belong to Him?

Do I really recognize His right to me?

Do I respond to His authority and acknowledge His ownership? (p. 12)

And then, the second thing implied when we say “The Lord is MY shepherd” is **satisfaction.** When we claim the Lord as our shepherd, we are saying that we want nothing else.

Clearly, David takes pride in having a relationship with this shepherd. He’s speaking with pride and devotion and admiration about His shepherd. Like he’s looking at the other sheep and boasting, “Hey, check out who my shepherd is! My owner, my Lord!”

Because, here’s the thing: the quality of life of the sheep is going to be determined by the quality of the shepherd. Sheep, because of who they are, because of how dependent and lost and weak they are, are vitally linked to their shepherd. If they have a good shepherd, then a sheep’s life is going to be pretty good: the greenest grass, the freshest water, the safest places to rest. But if they have a bad shepherd, then a sheep’s life is going to be pretty lousy: always hungry, always lost, always afraid.

And this Psalm is declaring that the LORD is the best shepherd.

That’s what the second half of this verse is getting at: “I lack nothing.” A lot of us have that memorized, from older translations, as “I shall not want.”

That doesn’t mean that when you follow Jesus you’ll be insanely rich. It doesn’t mean instant health and wealth. In fact, those who follow Jesus often find they do with less than others in this world. It doesn’t mean you’ll have everything the world says is important.

But what it does mean is that you won’t want anything or anyone else for a shepherd. It means you are satisfied with the shepherd you have. You won’t be casting your eyes at other shepherds, wishing you had what other sheep have.

When you have the LORD as your shepherd, it means even if you have nothing else, you have a good deal.

And so, what about you? Can you say, with all your heart, “The LORD is MY Shepherd”?