

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
11 October 2026

Psalm 23

On the day of their anniversary a wife tells her husband, "Honey I had a dream last night that you gave me a beautiful diamond necklace as an anniversary gift. What do you think the dream means?" Smiling romantically, he answered her, "Well, I guess you will find out tonight." When the evening came, and after a romantic dinner, the husband gave a wrapped box to his wife who excitedly opened it up. Inside there was a book entitled, "On the Interpretation of Dreams."

Our gift today is one we know quite well. The ascription to Psalm 23 reads, "A Psalm of David" and many commentators have traditionally believed that David wrote this Psalm when he was an older man. As he reflects on his early life as a shepherd when he was a young man (1 Samuel 16,) and perhaps on his current life as a king. Kings are often called "a shepherd of the people" in ancient cultures, but David starts thinking of the ways in which God is the true shepherd of Israel, above any king or pagan god. God, the Shepherd, is different from earthly kings.

The problem with this ascription ("A Psalm of David") is that ascriptions are not original to the Psalms. They were given to Psalms much later, after the people had returned from their exile in Babylon, around the 5th to 4th centuries before Jesus. What this means is that we cannot take the ascription as proof the David wrote this Psalm. The truth is that we don't know who the author is. We do know that the Psalm was written in Hebrew, but we also know that the Psalm was later edited to read as we have it today.

I cannot think of a Psalm that has been more beloved by all Christian denominations over the last 2,000 years than Psalm 23. We read it at funerals, when we need encouragement at difficult times in our life, at the hospital beds of those who are ill, when we celebrate the feast of the Christ the Good Shepherd in our lectionary every year, etc. "The Psalm is frequently quoted or alluded to in modern movies and music. In the movie Titanic, for example, a priest reads it aloud as the ship sinks. Musical groups and artists including U2 ("Love Rescue Me"), Pink Floyd ("Sheep"), and Kanye West ("Jesus Walks") have all referenced Psalm 23 in their music." ([BibleGateway.](#))

The Psalm begins with a statement that is well known in biblical literature, like Ezekiel 34, just to mention one source. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." The Lord God is the true shepherd of his people, and He is the only one

who cares deeply for the wellbeing of the sheep. Earthly shepherds like kings and high priests only care about their own power and accumulation of wealth, and they often place unrealistic burdens on the shoulders of their sheep. Burdens that are almost impossible to carry. They treat the sheep with tremendous cruelty and only as pawns in their political or religious games. But the Psalm encourages the sheep of Israel to rely on God because God can be trusted. When sheep trust the Lord, they are never in want, they are protected and cared for. This provision is not limited to financial provision, but it includes every area of the people's life.

The Psalm then states that God leads his sheep to still waters and restores their soul. This is a promise of physical and spiritual renewal we all need to hear in a world that encourages frantic activity and constant striving, where people have value insofar as they produce wealth and achieve social standing. For Israel, true rest would have meant freedom from fear, tension, political instability, violence, pests, and hunger. For us these still waters are just as necessary. We live in a loud, violent, polarized world and we are constantly surrounded by internal and external threats. To know that God actively creates the conditions necessary for deep physical and spiritual renewal and engagement with Him and others brings great comfort to weary humans.

The Psalm then refuses to deny the reality of human suffering. It doesn't say, "Because I trust in God, I will never suffer!" Rather it says, "Although I am walking in the valley of the shadow of death, I am comforted by the fact that God is with me." The sheep derive courage not in the absence of danger, suffering, aging, illnesses, interpersonal conflict, financial reversals, doubts, and pain, but rather courage is found in knowing that the Shepherd is always present in their lives. God can be relied upon. His guidance and power (Rod and staff) are never in short supply. We are not left orphans in this confusing world, but rather, our shepherd walks alongside us, guiding us and giving us the strength to keep walking towards our final destination. Never alone and never unprotected!

The Psalm then presents this powerful and loving shepherd as a caring and devoted host at a great banquet. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." God's provision is overflowing with generosity. The sheep transition from open pastures to a great banquet where God anoints their heads with oil, a sign of great hospitality and care. God fills their cup to overflowing. The Psalm doesn't tell us what drink the host is offering, but of course we know these must be Margaritas! In either case, there is an abundance to God's grace. We receive much more than we deserve or can even ask for. The best part is that there is no mention of merit in the Psalm. There is nothing particularly significant about these sheep, other than the fact that they belong to a Shepherd who loves them in extravagant

ways. There is no qualitative difference between these sheep and other sheep, which is always great news for all of us. We too are garden variety sheep, qualitatively alike any other sheep around the world, yet God cares deeply for each of us. Not because of anything of value we may offer God, but because God loves us in ways that are hard to explain.

The Psalm ends with the following verses, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” This allusion to God’s goodness and mercy is known in the Old Testament as God’s *hesed*. This *hesed* is unmerited grace that always goes above and beyond what is needed or asked for. In a way, the Psalm is affirming that God will go to any extent to care for and to protect the sheep. And here is where the New Testament picks up the story.

It is impossible for me to read Psalm 23 without thinking of Jesus of Nazareth. If we want a real-life story and image of how much the Shepherd cares for the sheep, all we have to do is to look at our Messiah. In him we see God’s abundant *hesed*. At a miracle in Cana of Galilee, Jesus turns approximately 120 gallons of water into great wine, when only 30 would have been enough. This is grace that is undeserved and which goes above and beyond what is required or asked for. In John 10, Jesus himself tells us that he is the Good Shepherd who is willing to give up his life for the sheep. Again, not because these are rare, choice, expensive sheep, but because He owns the sheep and knows them all by name.

Yesterday at Matt Wenckens’ funeral I emphasized the fact that there is very little in us that would warrant the great sacrifices the Shepherd is willing to go through to rescue us, but that is exactly the point of God’s grace. Is not because we love God with perfect devotion that God gives up his only Son for our salvation. It is not because we love God perfectly, but rather it is because God loves us perfectly. This is the point. Without God in our lives we would be wandering, terrified, unprotected sheep. Completely overwhelmed by the cares of the world, filled with anxiety and fear, self-preoccupied, and lacking in true intimacy with God and others. But the good news is that God has sent Messiah to be among us. Through the cross and his resurrection, Christ has chosen to dwell among us and to leave us his Holy Spirit to guide us the rest of the way. The good news is that we are not orphans in a lonely planet. God is with us and one day we will be in God’s holy mountain enjoying the feast prepared for all peoples, as Isaiah promises today.

Whatever anxieties rest in your heart today, I encourage you to place them at the foot of the cross and to rest in the knowledge of God’s infinite love for you. May the Shepherd continue to bless you. Amen!