

The Good Shepherd's Work

Psalm 23...some of the most beautiful and well-known words in all of Holy Scripture. The imagery that the psalmist paints of our Good Shepherd and the green, lush pastures and the quiet, cool waters...does it get any better? This psalm gives a peace and a joy that truly does surpass all understanding. It should come as no surprise that even the most foolish and stubborn and wayward of folks want this text at the forefront when it comes time for a funeral. That's how powerful these words of peace and comfort are.

And yet there are some questions that need to be asked. Let's start with the "why." Why does the Good Shepherd do all this for us? Well...we certainly know why He **doesn't** do it, right? He doesn't care for us and nurture us and guide us and lead us and make our cups over-flowing with His super-abundant love **because we somehow deserve it**. All of this divine grace and blessing and goodness isn't showered upon us because of who we are, **but rather because of who He is; because of His nature**. God is love. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. **This does not change**. God is and remains all these things independent of us; **regardless** of us. Why does God do all that He does for us? Because that's just who He is.

Perhaps a better a question for us to consider is "how." **How** does God do all these things for us? **How** does our Good Shepherd show us this over-flowing divine mercy, grace, and love? Caution: The answer may not be as "Hallmark-y/Lifetime Channel-y" as some of you may think. Just consider the words of verse 3 (Psalm 23). "*He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.*" Again, it's all very beautiful, but there's a lot here that **we just plain miss**. We hear "restore," and we tend to think in terms of "spa treatment" or "vacation." It's all so peaceful and tranquil. God restores peace to our troubled lives and our troubled souls.

Don't get me wrong: God **does** restore to us His peace, but there's more to it than simply replenishing a "warm and fuzzy" feeling that has somehow escaped us. There's even more to it than God restoring assurance in the place of doubt and despair. The original Hebrew uses the word "*shoob*," which we translate as "restore." This word is used over 1,000 times in the Old Testament, and the vast majority of the uses refer specifically to **repentance**; that is, to the turning around and turning away from sin, death, and the devil.

I want you to think about this. So often we tend to think of repentance in **synergistic** terms; i.e., God does His part and we do ours. I know we Lutherans hear this and immediately bristle up and go on the defensive. **We're not**

synergistic! We don't do anything *in order to be saved*. We're saved by faith alone in God's grace alone, which is ours because of the work and person of Christ alone! And yet...when it comes to repentance, we do sometimes let our inborn Old Adam works-righteousness show. Repentance is what *we* do on our part, right? *We* turn around. *We* turn back to God. *We* exercise our free will and *we* do our part in turning and returning to life and salvation and peace. Such foolish arrogance forgets the reality that we are all, by nature, *sinful corpses*. Such arrogance forgets how God works and breathes His life-giving breath into our corpses of sin. Such arrogance dares to take credit for the Good Shepherd's work! Such foolish arrogance turns this text into a text about the sheep instead of the Good Shepherd.

What the psalmist is saying here is that God “*shoobs*” us; that is, He “repents” us. That doesn't mean that God repents for us, nor does it mean that God **MAKES** us repent. *God repents us*. He brings us to repentance. How does this work? By means of His life-giving, life-restoring Word! Like we heard last week with Ezekiel in the valley of the dried out bones, the voice and Word of the Good Shepherd cries out in the wilderness; in the midst valley of the shadow of death and darkness. The voice and Word of the Good Shepherd cries out, and that voice and Word gives and restores life to death. His Word turns us back from death to life; from sin to salvation. To be “repented” **is** to be restored; turned and restored from death to life; turned and restored from the guilt and condemnation of sin to the life and peace of the assurance of forgiveness.

Notice: The voice and Word of the Good Shepherd *precedes ANY* action on the part of the sheep! The voice and Word of the Good Shepherd comes *first*. The Good Shepherd's lambs hear His voice and respond. They turn and return to their Good Shepherd. They turn and return because they know the Truth. They know the reality of their *miserable existence* apart from the Good Shepherd. They know His voice; they know Him, and they return to Him.

And this takes us back to the “why” question. *Why* does the Good Shepherd do all this? Why waste His holy time on us stubborn, foolish, and sinful sheep, who continue to fight and rebel and wander away? The psalmist answers this at the end of verse 3. “*He leads me in the path of tzedek (which is Hebrew for ‘justification’ or ‘righteousness’) for His name’s sake.*” In other words, it's all because of His name—because of who He is—that He does all this.

God commanded Joseph at the announcement of Mary's divine pregnancy, “*You will name Him Jesus because He will save His people from their sins.*” **That's just who He is.** He is Savior. He is love. He is merciful and long-suffering. He desires the death of *no* man. He desires that *all* hear and turn and have the life and peace that is found only in Him. *Christ died for the sins of the*

whole world, not just for some. He, and He alone, is the One who *tsedek's*; that is, who justifies; the One who declared victoriously from His own cross as He laid down His life for all the wayward flock of Adam, "*It is finished!*" ***That's our justification right there!*** To be justified means that we are declared "innocent." We are not justified because of who we are what we've done or not done. By nature we're sinful and unclean. By nature we deserve nothing but God's present and eternal punishment. We've got NOTHING to offer! ***But...we are justified in Christ and because of Christ.*** We have been declared "innocent" by our heavenly Father because the Good Shepherd has paid our price; our wage of sin, in our place. He became our curse. More importantly, His resurrection victory over sin, death, and the grave is our victory. This Good Shepherd doesn't just shed His blood and lay down His life for the sheep in their place, ***but He also triumphantly takes it up again.*** His victory is our victory, for we have been baptized into His death and resurrection.

And that's one final point I want to make in this last minute or so. ***Here*** [*Word and Sacrament*] is our Good Shepherd, in the midst of this shadowy valley of death that we dare to call "life," calling out to us, leading us in His path of justification, holding out to us His gifts of life, mercy, grace, and salvation. Folks: The beauties and comforts of Psalm 23 aren't just a future-tense reality when you get home to heaven. ***Here*** is our justification, in very real and tangible forms—His over-flowing means of grace! ***Here*** is His sweet pasture of grace! Here are the cool, refreshing, endless life-giving waters of His Word and His Sacraments. Here is our Good Shepherd! "*No one comes to the Father except through Me.*" Here is the path of Christ's righteousness; the path of our justification, which leads us home to our heavenly pasture. It is the path—the Way—of the cross, and our Good Shepherd is right here, holding out His pierced hands, calling out to us in order to ***repent us and restore us and return us*** to Him and His mercy, His grace, His peace that truly does surpass all human understanding. "*Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*"

My prayer for you is that you hear and see and recognize, not only the Good Shepherd in your midst, but the unmerited and unconditional grace, mercy, and peace that He is so freely and unconditionally holding out to you. ***Here is His peace and comfort; peace and comfort that the world cannot give.*** May this blessed and undeserved righteousness of Christ restore unto you the joy of your salvation; salvation that is yours because of God's grace alone, which He bestows upon you because of the work and person of your Good Shepherd alone.

To Him alone be all glory, praise, and honor.

AMEN