

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, July 31, 2016**

THE GREAT SHEPHERD

Psalm 23:1-6

We have all probably heard that sheep are not very bright. They need to be told what to do, they need to be told how to find food, they need to be protected against various predators who find the idea of lamb chops very, very appetizing. They need to be cared for. Now it is not true that it is impossible for sheep to survive on their own. They can. Just not very well. There's no question that they do far better, life for them is far easier, if they have a shepherd, a human being who cares for them, who protects them, who leads them where they are to go, who ensures that they are well fed and who, in general, makes life very pleasant for them before eating them.

We'll forget about that last part because, as we all know, analogies of God and His people and human beings and the rest of creation are never perfect. But what I'd like for us to do this morning is to take a look at Psalm 23 and to hear that and put ourselves, of course, in the place of the sheep. Now please do not think that I am calling anyone here dumb. I'm not. But it is the case that left to ourselves, purely on our own, trying to make our way through the world, we will inevitably mess it up. No matter how wealthy we are, no matter how well-educated we are, no matter how good we think we have it, in the end we will mess it up. And that's why a shepherd is needed.

David talks about that shepherd in this passage and he talks about Him primarily in two terms. First, he talks about Him in terms of His provision and second, he talks about Him in terms of His protection. Verses 1-3 of Psalm 23 talk about the shepherd's provision and the address in this passage and indeed in this entire Psalm is intensely personal. It's probably the case and yet another place where the analogy breaks down that sheep don't have a really intense relationship with the shepherd, though undoubtedly they also recognize the voice of the shepherd, they recognize his staff in their sheep-like way and they entrust themselves to him. But David talks about his shepherd in ways that are intensely personal. In verse 1 he says, "The Lord is my shepherd." *My* shepherd. Now he doesn't mean by that that the Lord is not Israel's shepherd as a whole because of course He is. And in the same way it is possible for us to say that He is the shepherd of the church, of the entire people of God, regardless of where they are and at the same time we can use the expression *my* God, because He is ours, personally. He is the God of both the community and of the individual. And unfortunately we have not always kept those two halves of this equation in balance. And that's something I'm suggesting this morning we need to keep in mind. But there is a balance between the two, that God is the God of the body as well as the individual and, at the same time, that God is personal to us and each of us has an individual relationship with Him that does not supersede, does not replace the relationship He has with the community but rather is found in that context.

As I said, Christians have not always been very good at keeping these two things together. On the one hand we have the mindset that is best summed up in the bumper

sticker *God is my Co-pilot*. You've seen that, right? *God is my Co-pilot*. It is true that if I needed to I could fly this plane alone, but it's good to have a co-pilot just in case things don't go just exactly the way they're supposed to. It's good to have two pairs of eyes on the instruments. So God is the one who takes the back seat. He'll come in and He'll deal with things if they go wrong or if we need a second opinion but for the most part, I'm in charge. It's not really like that, is it? God's not the co-pilot. God's the pilot. We're not the co-pilots. We're not even the passengers. We're in the cargo hold. We are just going along for the ride and hoping and praying we don't wind up in Luxembourg when we are trying to get to Detroit. We are the ones who give Him charge over what is happening. In fact, we don't even give it to Him. He simply has it and He allows us to go along for the ride.

We also sometimes think of this "*God is my co-pilot*" kind of religion in terms of an individualism that means just me and God. The rest of you, we don't need you. Especially because as we all know the church is full of hypocrites and I, not being one, don't need to have anything to do with it. I don't need the church because, in the words of the old song, "Jesus is just all right with me." Do you remember that one? It's not actually by the Byrds or by the Dooby Brothers. It's by a fellow by the name of Arthur Reynolds who was writing a gospel song. He wasn't writing a rock and roll song but he embodied this kind of mindset that says, "You know, me and Jesus, we're like this, and that's all I need. I don't care what *they* (they is you, I presume) may know. I don't care where they may go. I don't care what they may know. Jesus is just all right. Jesus is just all right. I don't care what they may say. I don't care what they may do. I don't care what they may say. Jesus is just all right." Every time I hear that song on the radio my teeth start to itch and I immediately turn it off because I don't care who did it, it's a mindset that is directly contrary to the faith of which we are a part.

The faith of which we are a part for one thing doesn't say that Jesus is just all right. It says Jesus is Lord and God and Savior and Redeemer. He's a lot better than all right. And it doesn't say I don't care about anybody else. It says I care intensely about others, even those who don't like Him, because God does. This is a hyper-individualistic way of looking at our relationship with God. And on the other hand you have the one who says that the first verse of the 23rd Psalm needs to be rewritten because the Lord is not *my* shepherd, the Lord is *our* shepherd. And of course that's true, but it's an approach that completely rejects the idea that we have a personal relationship with God that is in the context of a community but is not identical to it. The former presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church put it this way: "The overarching connection in all of these crises (crises of faith in the western church) has to do with the great western heresy that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God." Well, of course, it is the case that every single one of us is capable of being in right relationship with God apart from anyone else. We are not saved simply as a collection of undifferentiated people. When God looks at Helen or at Judy or at Nico He doesn't see Faith Church. Well, He does. He sees them as part of Faith Church. But He also sees them as Helen and Judy and Nico. He sees us as part of a body, so it is true that the Lord is our shepherd but He also sees us as individuals and so we can say, "The Lord is *my* shepherd."

In addition, then, to saying the Lord is *my* shepherd. He of course refers to God as *his* shepherd. That's his way of saying the He is King, that He is Savior, that He is Provider, that He serves the purposes in our lives that a shepherd who cares for the sheep under his stewardship serves his flock. In the process, David makes a very clear connection with Jesus, though he wasn't aware of it at the time but Jesus of course later on was. Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd and calls His followers His sheep in John 10. So it is that we can say, not just that God is our shepherd, but that Jesus Christ is our shepherd. *Our – my –* shepherd. It is Jesus who provides. It is Jesus who protects, not to the exclusion of anyone else, but for me personally just as much as anyone else among His people.

Well, what's the nature of that provision? That's what the second half of verse 1 as well as verses 2-3 are about. The first thing he says is, "I shall not want." I shall not want. It was this magnificent proclamation of David that because the Lord is his shepherd he shall not want that inspired Janis Joplin to write her famous song *Mercedes Benz*. Because if I'm not going to want I should have everything I could possibly imagine. A Mercedes Benz is a nice start. Pretty much unlimited money would be another one. That would be a second one. The love and admiration of everyone I know, without exception, would be something else I would like to have. I'd like to have access to the powers-that-be in the world. I'd like to think that I have the president's ear or my congressman's ear or my senator's ear, my governor's ear. If I lived in another country I'd like to have my prime minister's ear. That's something I want. And here, in verse 1 of the 23rd Psalm I am promised that. Forever and ever. Right? Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that a great promise? If you believe anything I just said, Benny Hinn is having a revival down the road. He wants you!

That's the way the health and wealth gospel ministers might hear it. No, when David says, "I shall not want," keep in mind who he's talking about. Yes, he was a king but he was not always a king. This was a man who at times during the course of his life feared for his life. This was a man who knew what it was to be hungry. This was a man who knew what it was like to sleep out under the open stars on rocky ground. This was a man who knew what it was to have the powers-that-be not listening to him but trying to kill him. This was a man who knew deprivation. And yet, he can say, "I shall not want." You'd think his experience would tell him otherwise, wouldn't you? In fact his experience did not tell otherwise. Because when he says, "I shall not want," he's thinking in the most basic of terms. It's the Lord who provides the air that we breathe. It's the Lord who provides the food that we eat, however meager it might be. It's the Lord who puts us into relationships with other people. It's His doing.

In his book, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn writes of one day in a Soviet prison camp, a *gulag*. He had spent many days like that and he was writing from his own personal experience. In the course of that book he described a variety of characters, including guards and fellow prisoners. One of the characters in that book is referred to as a Baptist. Baptists in the Soviet Union were relentlessly persecuted because they refused to give the kind of unquestioning obedience to the state that a lot of other people gave. And they did so on the basis of their faith. So their faith was a threat

to the state. So in his barracks there was a Baptist, and that Baptist invariably gave thanks over every meal. He gave thanks for the fish head soup. And when I say fish head soup, I mean that literally. It was soup that was flavored with fish heads. It was considered to be a delicacy for them still to have the eyes. Just a little extra protein. He gave thanks for the moldy bread. He gave thanks for the work that they did out in the cold. He gave thanks even for the beatings. And Solzhenitsyn, in the person of the narrator, asks him how he can give thanks for such miserable conditions. And the Baptist tells him, "I give thanks, because everything that I have and everything that I am, God has given me. I came into this world with nothing and yes, even the moldy bread and the fish head soup, He provides." Doesn't sound like much to us, but when that's all there is, that's what you thank God for. That's what he means when he says we shall not want, even though as Americans wanting seems to be practically second nature to us, wanting far more than we need.

The second thing he says in the first half of verse 2 is, "He makes me lie down." He gives us rest. Even in the midst of a life that seems to be a never-ending succession of stuff, meetings and events and tasks that have to be done, children that need to be driven here, there and everywhere, there's always something else to do. One of the things of which Maryanne is fond of reminding me is that while Monday may be my day off, all too often it's not hers, because there's still work to be done. There are still meals to be prepared. There are still clothes to be washed. Hebrews 4:1-11 puts it this way: "Therefore, since the promise of entering His rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you will be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us just as they did; but the message they heard (those who have not accepted the message) was of no value to them because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed, enter that rest, just as God has said, 'So I declare on oath, in my anger, they shall never enter my rest.' And yet His work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere He has spoken about the seventh day in these words, 'And on the seventh day God rested from all His work.'" And that rest is ours. No matter how busy we are, no matter how much there is to be done, still we find rest in Him. Rest, recreation, re-energization. We find rest in Him.

The third thing he mentions in terms of His provision is that He gives us of Himself. "He makes me lie down in green pastures." The verse refers to a watering place. The interesting thing is that when Jesus talks about Himself He refers to Himself as our bread and our drink. He gives Himself to us and He tells us, "Eat of me. Drink of me. Receive your life from me." We not only get rest, but we get Him.

He restores us, according to verse 3, in soul as well as body. The rest of which he speaks in verse 2 is not simply what we get when we lie down at night and go to sleep. He restores us in soul, renewing us daily through fellowship with Him. According to the second part of verse 3, He shows us the way of righteousness. "He guides me in paths of righteousness." Just as a shepherd does for his sheep, showing them the way they need to go. Showing them the way that will keep them away from the wolves and the dogs that want to kill and eat them. Showing them the way to where food and water are. In the same way the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd, David's Shepherd, our Shepherd

shows us the way by which we live in righteousness, living under His rule and being guided by Him.

Finally, at the end of verse 3, he says He does all of this for His name's sake. Now does that mean that He does this just for Himself? He doesn't really care about us? No, of course it doesn't mean that. He means that He does it in order that He might be recognized and acknowledged as the shepherd. That He might be known as the one who is giving the provision. If you had children eating every night at your dinner table who never acknowledged who provided the meal and who cooked it, you'd think after a while that they weren't even related to you. They're people who just happen to live in the same house who took from you the way we might take from anybody what we need. No, children and parents have a different kind of relationship. Children say thank you at the end of a dinner in order to acknowledge that parents are the ones who provided for them. And in the same way, we're called to acknowledge who it is who offers the provision for us. His name's sake.

So the first part of this psalm has to do with God's provision. The second half has to do with protection. At this point it's interesting, because David ceases to speak *of* God and begins to speak *to* Him. Which deepens, even more, the personal element. It goes from a description to being a conversation. And it's a conversation that is about what is most important to David, which is his relationship with his Lord.

God's protection, in this psalm, encompasses three things. First, in verse 4, he says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." This is a man who knew whereof he spoke. David was a man whose life had been threatened on multiple occasions. It was threatened by Saul. Once Saul was told that David would be his successor, he set out to kill him. And let's face it. If the king wants you dead, the chances are fairly good that that's exactly what's going to happen. He's not king for nothing. And yet it was God who protected him. He was threatened by his son Absalom later, who didn't care that his father was king. He wanted to be king himself and again threatened David's life. The Philistines threatened his life. Can you imagine facing a man over nine feet tall, a man enormously powerful, a man whom no one wanted to fight one-on-one because they knew what the result was going to be? David faced Goliath as a young boy, armed with nothing more than a slingshot and some rocks. He faced death squarely on that occasion and it was God who protected him and enabled him to triumph over it. When David says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," he knows what he's talking about. And there are people in this room who know what he's talking about, as well. First hand. Because you have walked through that valley. You have been in dangerous situations where you knew that your very life was in danger. Whether it was in the military or because of a medical condition or because of an accident, you knew that your life was in danger. And yet, you would place yourself in His hands and fear no evil, simply and solely because you knew that He was with you.

He refers to evil in verse 4: "I will fear no evil." Because the kind of death that he faced was much more often than not the result of the actions of evil coming against him. And

that is something that unfortunately more and more we are going to have to get used to. And Christians are getting used to it in this world. Here in America, when we speak of persecution we think of it in terms of legal strictures. Or social disapproval. But Christian girls in Nigeria, kidnapped and enslaved by the Boko Haram, or Assyrians in northern Iraq threatened with beheading and in some instances beheaded by ISIS, when they hear these words they look over their shoulders and they see that shadow. It is all too real to them. And there are Christians across the globe who are experiencing that. You may have heard this week about the 84-year-old French priest who was killed in his church as he celebrated mass. He's now being referred to as a martyr. That sounds about right. He was chosen deliberately, as a Christian, as a religious leader, and his death was specifically planned for the middle of a Christian ceremony. The person who slit his throat even offered a sermon in Arabic to the non-Arabic speaking congregation. That's in France. That's not Iraq. That's not Nigeria. That's civilized France. Where a man whose position in his community is roughly the same as mine, had his throat cut because of that profession, and that location.

We live in the valley of the shadow of death and yet we need not fear that evil. No, we don't walk out and go seek it. We don't go up to ISIS terrorists and say, "Please cut my throat." But we do what the Lord has called us to, recognizing that even now the world is becoming a more and more dangerous place for those of us who follow Jesus Christ. We do not need to fear them, however. And we do not need to fear them because His rod and His staff they comfort me. They provide succor even in the midst of pain and suffering and death, so that there is no need to fear.

He also speaks of that protection in terms of enemies. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Another way of saying that our earthly enemies cannot ultimately harm us. But wait a minute! That French priest we were just talking about, they harmed him good and solid! That French priest, God willing, is now in the immediate presence of Jesus Christ. Did they harm him, ultimately? No, they didn't. Because what David is talking about here, the table that he talks about, the anointing that he talks about, the house of the Lord that he talks about dwelling in forever, is not simply this life, not simply this life's food or shelter or health but rather that of eternity.

Now all of this, talking about God's protection in terms of evil and death and enemies, is reflected in Jesus' use of the figure of the Good Shepherd who protects the sheep from thieves and from robbers even at the cost of His own life. The rod and staff are shepherds' tools which they use not just to guide the sheep but also to beat off those who would steal them, as well as for retrieving those who have been lost. The table that he refers to in verse 5 points ahead to the Lord's Supper and the various New Testament references to banquets as a sign of God's provision for us and His protection that means that those banquets can never be taken from us. The banquet that we will eat at in the kingdom of God doesn't mean the turkey dinner that you're going to have next Thanksgiving. It means the eternal feast that we will have in God's presence when the kingdom comes in its fullness. And the anointing of oil that he refers to in verse 5, "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows," is associated with the work of the Holy Spirit who is with us daily and who is the source of that provision and that protection.

Provision and protection that will never end. “Surely, goodness and love (or mercy, in other versions) will follow me all the days of my life.” Yes, in this life, God is with us, and His provision and His protection are with us. “And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Forever! Goodness is the fulfillment of God’s will for each of us, the carrying out of His plans. And His plan is that none of us will ever be lost. Mercy (*hesed*) is covenant love, which is why the NIV version translates it as love. His redemptive power, His faithfulness toward His people. Once again, we know that His plans cannot be overthrown and all of these are integral aspects of our daily lives and the life that we shall live forever and ever.

And so it is that the Baptist in the Soviet gulag eating fish head soup and moldy bread could thank God for His provision because it has gotten him through another day of this life and another day closer to the life eternal. So the Assyrian in northern Iraq who has been deprived of his home and his wife who has been sold into slavery can thank God because he lives another day to praise God, hopefully to rescue his wife who praises God because she can be a witness to the love of Christ even in her enslavement. And the stories are manifold of women who have been taken by ISIS and who will not renounce their faith no matter what is offered to them to do so. All of those, and us. All of them and us have the same shepherd and the same promises. And no, we do not live the same lives. We don’t necessarily face the same dangers. But we are the recipients of the same good gifts. Now and forever