

*“Hit Songs, B.C.”-- Summer Sermon Series*  
Founders' Chapel  
“Life with the Good Shepherd”  
by Rev. James C. Ramsey

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Texts: Psalm 23  
John 10:14-18

Preached: 8/25/19

[IMAGE – Greatest Hits]

All summer I have been working through a sermon series featuring hit songs. But we're not talking pop songs, country western or even classic rock and roll. These greatest hits were popular when Isaiah was a prophet and Nehemiah was rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem! Of course, we've been talking about The Psalms.

[IMAGE – Psalm 23 t-shirt]

And if these greatest hits had one record-setting chart topper, it would certainly be Psalm 23, which I feature today. Some people even have a concert t-shirt!

[IMAGE – shepherd in the trees]

Who's your shepherd? ....In a different context, you might pause before you answer. You might answer with more questions, “What do you mean? What makes you think I have a shepherd...or need one? No one is the shepherd of me. I make my own decisions.

[IMAGE – leadership]

Or maybe you do have someone you follow...a supervisor, a mentor, a commanding officer, a chairperson, a trusted friend, a ringleader, a celebrity, a sports hero, a political leader, or some other influencer.

Who's your shepherd?

[IMAGE – the LORD is my Shepherd]

Most of us have claimed at one time or another, “The LORD is my shepherd.” Once you say the words, maybe a flood of memories washes over you. Maybe you have read the psalm at particularly difficult times in your life – or heard it read at the funeral of a loved one – or memorized the words when you were younger.

[IMAGE – Hebrew text]

(The picture is the Hebrew Text of Psalm 23, painted with a symbolic valley in the background, by artist Alyse Radenovic.)

The words are precious to Jew and Christian alike. The LORD provides – nourishment for body and soul, rest when you are weary, peace when you need a break, safe going...even when the way is darker than night, when there is evil to fear, comfort in the face of turmoil, plenty even in the presence of adversaries.

[IMAGE – Exodus]

There is much debate about the historical context of Psalm 23. One camp insists that the shepherding image of God comes out of the Exodus tradition, the stories of God's people leaving Egyptian slavery and venturing through the wilderness, including the crossing of the Red Sea, toward the Promised Land. Here, more than at any other time, God's people could envision themselves as a wandering flock, totally reliant upon their "good shepherd" for guidance. Through their many mistakes and missteps, the wandering Hebrews learned the consequences of going it alone, independent of God's guidance. Disaster always struck. God the Good Shepherd would lead the sometimes headstrong, cantankerous flock into "right paths."

[IMAGE – cover pic]

--another camp imagines that the Psalm originated in the mind of a shepherd-poet, David, musing that he, himself is a lamb, and God watches over him, as he watches over his own sheep. It moves him to praise the Good Shepherd for all the blessings he enjoys... plenty of cool water to drink, endless tracts of grassy pastureland in which to meander and graze, all while under the watchful eye of a Guardian whose staff is there to fight off wolves.

We tend to claim the psalm for ourselves...in a deeply personal way, but the shepherd watches over a large flock.

[IMAGE – Shepherd in the hills]

If the LORD is my shepherd, I acknowledge that I am part of that flock, that the LORD cares for the others, as well. The advantages of having a shepherd are many, but with those come some inherent responsibilities. Jesus says later, "I am the Good Shepherd," reminding us of the psalm, but also that God knows us and we know God...through Jesus.

[IMAGE – listen]

If the LORD is my shepherd, Jesus reminds us, then we listen to his voice. Life with the Good Shepherd asks something of us, demands even. But the rewards are great, although not ridiculous!

[IMAGE – satisfied]

The psalm reads, "I shall not want." It probably doesn't mean that we are forbidden to desire anything. Other translations make it clearer, stating rather, "There is nothing I lack." OR, expressing it positively: "The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need."

(incidentally, do you know the image? It's American Sign Language for "satisfied!")

I like an old rabbi's wisdom, who says the verse really means, "The Lord is my shepherd, what more do I need?" It's a statement of satisfaction, of sufficiency, of contentment that goes against the grain of our modern hyper-materialistic consumer society.

[IMAGE – LittleGirl]

And there is as much wisdom in the words of the little girl, reciting the psalm in Sunday School, who began, "The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I want."

[IMAGE – dark valley]

This most beloved of psalms, as comforting as it is to so many of us, does not offer the hope of always happy-sappy endings...nor does it suggest that bad things will not happen to good people. In fact, the centerpiece of the brief song speaks of the darkest times and even death...it recognizes there are those who seek our harm, enemies.

[IMAGE – Shepherd in the trees]

When we enter into the psalm we take a journey: from an initial sense of calm, through a dark valley of grief, and finally into a place of goodness and mercy in the house of the LORD. No matter what trials we face, what pitfalls we encounter, what enemies we fear – we are not on our own... "for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me."

[IMAGE – Immanuel]

Most of us understand, with the psalmist, that God does not promise an easy ride or a trouble-free life; God promises to be with us, the Good Shepherd.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.