

“Overflow” (25 April 2021)
Psalm 23; John 10:18-25
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Prayer: God who is grace, glory, good, we come before you today in profound gratitude for all you have gifted to us. Life, laughter, love. We offer you our praise and give thanks for your mercies, which never end. Help us to follow where you lead us, O God, each and every day. Open our ears that we might hear, our eyes that we might see the wonder of your profound love for us that is Jesus the Christ. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you this day. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

I shall not want. It’s hard for me to imagine four words that are more out of tune with the tenor of our life in the modern world. Our whole society seems to be based on the pursuit of happiness through buying more and more stuff. Advertisers spend billions of dollars a year convincing us we will not be happy without the latest: car, spaghetti sauce, laptop, ride-on lawn mower, chocolate bar, vacation in Bermuda, medication for a condition we don’t have (watch out for those side effects), streaming video service, and...well, you get the idea. According to one estimate, we are exposed to something like 5,000 advertisements a day,¹ all of them aimed at generating in us want—the desire, the need, to buy more stuff.

And so, when I read the first line of the 23rd Psalm, I come to a dead stop. “I shall not want.” What is that even like? Is it possible to have all my needs met? Who can lead us into that place where we have what we truly need?

This Sunday is sometimes known as Good Shepherd Sunday in the church. It falls during the season of Eastertide—the weeks after Easter. This Sunday serves as a reminder of the shepherding role Jesus plays in our lives. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we hear in the Gospel lesson from John, the one who knows his followers, who protects them from dangers, who seeks the best for them, and who ultimately, willingly, lays down his life for his sheep. As Jesus himself says, he is the Good Shepherd, the embodiment—incarnation is a better word—of God the Good Shepherd as described in the Psalm.

In this beautiful poem, which is one of the most-loved of all passages in the Bible, the psalmist speaks of God as one who provides for us, who accompanies us, and who gives in overflowing abundance. In the end, all that God gives us meets our needs...not our insatiable desire for material goods. Despite what you may have heard, life is not a competition where “whoever dies with the most toys wins.” Rather, the psalm speaks to the deep desires of the human soul:

- Acceptance of who and what we are.
- Our need to have relationship.
- Our search for inner peace.
- In a word, our desire to be loved, and to know it.

One of the many things we see in the 23rd Psalm is how God takes us on a journey—that is, after all, what shepherds do—from our place of insecurity and anxiety, to a place of fulfillment and grace.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.

Here is a picture of God meeting our deepest needs for rest and restoration from the struggles of life.

Green meadows, quiet waters.

¹ Sam Carr, “How Many Ads Do We See A Day In 2021?” PPC Protect.com, February 15, 2021, article on internet, <https://ppcprotect.com/how-many-ads-do-we-see-a-day/>, accessed 21 Apr 2021.

Stay awhile.

This is what you need to be renewed, made whole again.

Before the journey continues.

People need these things—refreshment is another word for it—just as sheep need them.

The journey continues...

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;

For you are with me;

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

We might be tempted to think that with God, all the threats to our lives will be gone. That's not the case, as we know from our own experiences. There are dangers in life that come in many forms: physical, professional, personal, relational. We face harm from natural causes too—disease, fire, storms. We face danger from people who want to discredit us, to steal from us.

But note how the shepherd in the psalm does not remove whatever threat or danger may be lurking out there. Instead, the shepherd escorts the sheep through them.² This is a realistic picture of life on planet Earth. God does not take us out of the storms of life, whatever form they may take. Instead, God accompanies us through the storms, through our darkest days, always present with us, never apart from us.

God promises to guide us—I am the good shepherd. We have only to listen for his voice, and to follow. I know that is easier said than done. It can be hard to listen for God in a world with so much noise, so much anger, so much pride in itself. But through prayer and reflection, Bible study and talking with other people of faith, we can hear God speak to us...maybe not in words, but God is still speaking love, mercy, grace...if only we choose to listen with the ears of our soul.

The journey continues and the scene changes:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Here's another picture that makes me stop and think. Oh, great! Just what I always wanted: to be seated at a table with my harshest critics sitting just across from me and beside me, and then to have somebody come up from behind and dump cooking oil on my head while the waiter puts too much wine (or grape juice) in my glass and it spills all over the table. Actually, the image of the banquet table tells us about the blessings God prepares for us as we follow God's pathways:

- What are my enemies doing at this table? They're the last ones I want to be seated with. But here is a sign, perhaps, of reconciliation. God offers the chance for us to reconcile with our opponents. Don't forget that Jesus reminded us to reconcile with others: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-44).
- The oil on the head, what's that about? In ancient cultures, this was a symbol of hospitality. God the host offers this not in a sacramental way, not like the guest is being commissioned or set apart for holy service, but as a sign of welcome and well-being.
- The table filled with fine foods is a picture of a good life that comes from following God. It is a life provisioned by God with an abundance of food and overflowing drink that more than satisfies human needs.³ It also points to the big picture of God's ultimate act of reconciliation and renewal—the New

² "Psalm 23: We Lack Nothing," Commented Bible Passages, *Taize website*, article on internet, https://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2008-05-01, accessed 20 Apr 2021.

³ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 3, The Writings, Ketuvim, A Translation with Commentary*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 71.

Creation. “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” (Isaiah 25:5-7), wrote the prophet Isaiah. And Christians add, when Christ returns, God will put an end to death and decay, sin will be no more. “See, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:4).

These are the blessings of the God who accompanies us through life, who shepherds us into places of refreshment, walks with us through our darkest hours, and provides for us an abundant life overflowing with God’s love. The journey concludes with the sheep, the followers, being followed themselves:

Goodness and mercy will follow me all of my life.

The Good Shepherd, who started out leading the sheep is now pursuing them, chasing them, even, with grace and mercy.⁴

God, so overflowing with love for people, wants to make sure we don’t miss the point. Goodness and mercy are gifts of God that are offered to us by a God who chases after us, offering us these gifts in hope that we will open our hands to receive them. God sent Jesus to show us what this mercy and grace look like. And we, and the world, have never been the same.

Jesus told a story about an ungrateful son who took his inheritance, dissed his father, and went away to lose all his money in a foreign land. When he returned, humbled and desperate to receive even scraps from his father’s table, his father ran to him and loved him. At the celebration that followed, the father’s other son, the one who remained at home, refused to go into the banquet, into the overflow of joy at his brother’s return. The father of the two sons did not stay at the dinner to celebrate the return of the prodigal son—he went out in pursuit of the other son, loving him, trying to persuade him to accept that goodness and mercy are for those who stay at home as well as those who go astray.

Beloved, I invite you today to allow God to guide you even more into the paths that lead to life. The good life is not measured by material things but in loving relationship with God and with others. Abundant life is found in Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, who leads us through life and into the Kingdom of God that overflows with God’s goodness, justice, mercy, and grace.

- Here everyone has a home.
- Here everyone has all they need.
- Here God’s love cannot be contained—it overflows to you and to me and to the world.

Share this love with your families, with your friends, and with your enemies. And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love. In the name of Jesus. Amen.



⁴ Joel LeMon, “Commentary on Psalm 23,” *Working Preacher.org*, April 25, 2021 [first posted April 26, 2015], article on internet, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-psalm-23-25>, accessed 20 Apr 2021.