

Psalm 23

August 25, 2011 – Funeral: Walter Herbert Kraetzner

The LORD Is My Shepherd

In the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep, dear loved ones of God and of our departed brother, Walter Kraetzner:

“It’s complicated.” How often have you heard people describe their lives like that? And yet in God’s view life is very simple. In all the windings and wanderings of this world, where will you spend eternity? Knowing the answer to that question makes all the difference in the world whether your “complicated” life is like a roller coaster or twisted derailment. Folks love the rides at the State Fair because of the simple understanding that there is safety in the end. Wild ride sometimes, but underneath there is a quiet serenity for all who can say with confidence: **The LORD Is My Shepherd.**

One of my last visits after nearly a decade of visits found Walter in the dining hall of the “Memory Unit” at Inver Glen Senior Care Center, Inver Grove Heights. I sat for a while with him and the other residents as the caring staff served lunch. A woman named Eloise was sitting nearby. Eloise kept commenting on how “all our food is made for us here. They take care of everything. They really take good care of us.” Now, Walter was used to Vienna’s cooking. I could still tell by his comments about the food. But he always agreed when I would point out how well the LORD takes care of us, providing food for our bodies and for our souls in His Word. Walter always said, **The LORD Is My Shepherd.**

On my last visit about two weeks ago things were not where they should be. His room seemed turned around to him. He kept “losing” things. He thought “2:30” meant it was nighttime. It seemed that evening had come for Walter’s life on earth. But there was no darkness inside him. Since he thought it was time to sleep, something he rarely did in the daytime, we said the Lord’s Prayer and this 23rd Psalm. It was like tucking him in to rest. He smiled with contentment. **The LORD Is My Shepherd.**

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.” A shepherd named Philip Keller wrote a classic book about this Psalm, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*.¹ People love this Psalm, but it is even more meaningful from Keller’s book because he grew up with shepherd boys in East Africa, then came to America as a shepherd and scientist to develop pastures and sheep care in Canada. That’s where I learned a major difference between western shepherding and the kind in Africa and up into Judea where David grew up as a shepherd boy. Before he became the king and the sweet psalmist of Israel, David cared for his father’s sheep. Here in the West shepherds drive their sheep with dogs, not cruel, but not as warm as how Jesus describes His own work as our Good Shepherd: **“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.”** (John 10:27f NIV84) Jesus goes out in front of His sheep. They follow the sound of His voice as recorded in the Bible. Jesus laid down His life for His sheep and took it up again in glorious resurrection. So Jesus has power to promise eternal life to all who believe, **The LORD Is My Shepherd.**

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.” Sheep that can rest grow healthy and strong. When the LORD is your Shepherd, He keeps restoring your soul through His Word of comfort. Pastures need preparing in places out west or in the land of Israel. Weeds need pulling, rocks removing, seeds sown to raise up rich legumes and grass for the shepherd’s own. I often saw that look of contentment on Walter’s face as he focused again on Jesus in Word and sacrament. Sheep are content when the LORD is their Shepherd.

A pastor friend of mine used to herd sheep for his uncle. He told how once after a rainstorm he could not get the sheep to cross a puddle in the road. It was about half an inch deep. He called, he

¹ Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. ISBN 0-310-26790-0 (Cloth), ISBN 0-310-26797-8 (Large Print)

pushed, he did everything he could. No movement. Finally he walked over, picked up the lead ewe, and carried her across the water. The rest followed like sheep.

We're gathered here more like sheep than most of us care to admit. Like most crowds in the Midwest, four out of ten have probably not been in church for the past six months except for a wedding or a funeral. Out West where I'm from, it's more like 80-90%. Coming to church can be as scary as crossing a ½" puddle for a flock of sheep. But "***Christ died for all.***" That's what God says. For you too Jesus rose from the dead. God says He declared everyone, "Not guilty!" for Jesus' sake. So I can say with absolute certainty that Jesus wants to be your Good Shepherd too. He even says, "***I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.***" (John 10:16 NIV84) Jesus the Good Shepherd, picked up Walter and took him home to heaven. Come, follow and say, **The LORD Is My Shepherd.**

"He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." God's Name is His reputation as the Good Shepherd. Maybe He put His name on you long ago when the pastor or priest poured on the water, or sprinkled or immersed you and said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." God is not concerned about who put on the water or how it was applied. It's His promise that gives the water the power to wash away sins, to deliver from death and the devil, to give eternal salvation to all who believe. The words and promise of God declare in the last chapter of Mark, "***Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.***" (Mark 16:16 NIV84) Many times I've seen how the Lord recalled His wandering sheep in funerals like this. Through God Word He wants you back to say, **The LORD Is My Shepherd.**

Leading His sheep to the high country means passing through the dark valleys where rivers flow and predators watch from the rim rock above. But as long as the sheep can hear the sound of their Shepherd's voice, they follow peacefully. "***Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.***" Most everyone can picture a shepherd's staff with the hook at the top. Pictures are famous of Jesus reaching down to lift a little lamb off a ledge. I did not know until Phillip Keller explained that the shepherd's rod is something different. In East Africa the shepherd boys would make a knobkerrie out of an 18" sapling and practice until they could throw it with lightning precision. One even saved Philip Keller from a cobra with a snap of his rod. Likewise, Christ saved us with the "***rod***" of His mouth from the serpent of hell.

But discipline is also in that "***rod***" of the Good Shepherd. This came up in the loss of Walter's driver's license. It's one of the most difficult tasks of grown children to become the caregivers for their parents. I've often pointed out to elderly parents that they taught their children the Fourth Commandment to *honor* their parents. In the failing years, *honor* sometimes means the opposite of *obey*. For their safety and that of others on the road we have to take away their freedom. But you know what helps? **The LORD is My Shepherd.** He lovingly leads me in the care of those I love. And He will love me to the end.

All I need I find in Him – my life, my legacy. "***Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.***" The Lord's Table of forgiveness in His body and blood – in, with and under the bread and wine – filled Walter often with life and hope. "***Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.***" Shepherd Philip Keller used to oil the heads of his sheep to get them to slip off when they tried to butt each other. Jesus soothes our squabbles too so we can laugh at ourselves and enjoy His love for us.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." Sheep leave behind healthier pastures. In the care of the Good Shepherd, Walter has left behind a legacy of honor in two faithful marriages and a legacy of love in his generous support of Christian education. But life goes on in heaven. For Jesus' sake each sheep can say, "***I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.***" May this be one more blessing in the legacy that Walter leaves for you. Look at Christ with confidence and say, "This is great! **The Lord Is My Shepherd.**" Amen.