

Psalm 23:2b,3a

April 26, 2015 – 4th SUNDAY OF EASTER

The LORD Is My Shepherd ¹

✦ He leads me beside quiet waters.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

A fellow pastor once told me about an incident that happened as he was caring for his uncle's sheep. They did not know him because he was not their shepherd. So it was challenging to lead them along a country road to pasture. It had just rained, so it wasn't long before they came to a spot where water was all the way across the pavement – a whole half inch deep! He walked right through then noticed the sheep were not following along. Do you think he could get them to cross that "dangerous" spot? He pushed, he pulled, he called, but they clustered in fear on the far side. Finally he picked up a prominent ewe and carried her to the other side. Then the rest followed.

Throughout the Bible God pictures His relationship with us as a shepherd with his sheep. He wants us to know the sound of His voice so we can follow without fear. But at times He who leads me by His hand will also pick me up and carry me. So great is His love that I a mere mortal have become the object of His divine diligence, affection and attention. ***"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."*** (Isaiah 40:11 NIV84) Because of His goodness each of us can boast, **The LORD Is My Shepherd!** Consider this:

✦ He leads me beside quiet waters.

Have you noticed how sheep are usually kept in arid regions without much water? I once thought it was because not much else could live there. Turns out it's best for sheep to be away from humid climates with too much disease and organisms in the water. Yet sheep need lots of water to live. Their body is 70 percent water on average. Every cell needs water to carry on normal metabolism and life functions. The vitality, strength and general health and well-being of sheep all depend on having a source of clean water. Dehydration will leave them weak and impoverished, unable to grow and flourish.

Isn't that so much like our soul, that part of us that I think of as "me"? God uses the physical world to help us see the spiritual. The world is full of religions that keep sheep running here and there, exhausted and dying by all the things they're supposed to do. Church Father Augustine of Africa summed it up this way: "O God! Thou has made us for Thyself and our souls are restless, searching, 'til they find their rest in Thee." Like sheep we too are totally dependent on the Good Shepherd to lead us to His righteousness which our souls crave. Otherwise, we suffer from thirsty fear and anxiety. But our Good Shepherd says, ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."*** (Matthew 5:6 NIV84) Indeed, our Good Shepherd knows three sources of pure water for us.

Sheep can go for months without actually drinking. A Shepherd can keep his flock satisfied even during drought by getting them up just before dawn or in the moonlight to feed in Dewey meadows, then lie down in the shade. Have you noticed that the most serene, confident, coping Christians rise early each day to follow the Master into the knee-deep pastures of God's Word? They love their quiet time alone with Jesus at break of day: thirst quenched, soul revived, heart satisfied with peace. Rushing out thirsty only makes matters worse in the heat. *To fertile vales and dewy meads my weary, wandering steps He leads.* (TLH 368:2) The Good Shepherd loves to see you contented, refreshed and satisfied.

¹ Insights based on classic devotional / pastoral theology text: *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, by Philip Keller.

All around are highly intelligent people who will only drink from the deep wells of human knowledge. But like sheep they don't realize these are the *"broken cisterns"* (Jeremiah 2:13) that can only leave them deeply disappointed in broken relationships. Young people of our new millennium thought "friends with benefits" could make them happy living together unmarried. Now studies are revealing what God's Word has said all along: *"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 6:23) Left to ourselves we foolish sheep wander from one mud hole relationship to another until our souls die eternally separated from God. But that is why our Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep to redeem you and me from the *"waterless pit."* (Zechariah 9:11)

The deep wells of God are not always the pleasant experience we might imagine. As a boy growing up in East Africa, Philip Keller remembers at the bottom of the deep wells were sweaty African shepherds bailing water to satisfy their flocks under the blazing sun. These often look like deep, dark, disagreeable places to us. But we are never alone. Our Good Shepherd is down there with us pouring out His strength and energy to make them profitable for our eternal souls. He delivers us from the dried up dust of despair in drugs, alcohol, sexual adventure and mad desire for sin. These can never satisfy our body or soul, but only leave us dead in transgressions and sins. Lives of misery and loneliness are relieved when you see the Good Shepherd is still drawing water hour by hour to quench your thirsty need. In Word and sacrament the dear Holy Spirit brings you this picture of Christ Himself as you glory in God's grace, drinking with your ears. There is no substitute for Jesus.

Dew on the grass, deep wells – a third source of water is obviously from streams and rivers. But the skillful shepherd is always leading His sheep up to magnificent mountain streams where snow-fed waters run crystal clear between lovely banks of trees. Why is that that the stubborn sheep always want to stop along the way? Foolish ewes teach their little lambs to drink from polluted puddles. It's not just the mud, but manure and urine left by passing herds.

People think, "So what? I can't see what's the problem," as they drink from every religious source imaginable. But they miss something every sheep cannot understand as he sucks up flukes and parasites from the puddles. There's always a delayed reaction. You can be walking along as if life is grand, and suddenly you're so sick in your soul you don't know what happened. It could be the water, if you've been drinking from faithless preachers who only feed their ego and their wallet as you sit and listen to everything but God's message of law and gospel, sin and grace. You feel good from the inspiring stories, but never realize how little you heard from God in that house of human worship. You're so inspired to do good for yourself that you never realize you can't even find good water for yourself.

Dear friends, that's our nature. We're so intrigued by earthly ideas because our souls are thirsty. But let's heed the warning and hear the beautiful promise of our Good Shepherd calling us to the high mountain streams through His Apostle Paul. The sinful nature feeds on dirty water, the Spirit gives life:

"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:19–25 NIV84)

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would lead us into truth. He'll keep you with Jesus the Good Shepherd as He guides and counsels us in Christ. He can help us see that the only truly satisfying life is with Jesus. We discover the delight of having our souls satisfied with His presence. He is our resurrection, overcoming life imparted to us by His Spirit each day as we are refreshed and satisfied by Word and Sacrament. **The Lord is My Shepherd – He leads me beside quiet waters.** Amen.

W.P ~ Wartburg Project translation in popular review. Other Scriptures: NIV84.

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