



Because we have had such terrible weather this summer, I wanted to grab themes from the book of Psalms to help us experience a little taste of summer in the mountains despite what it has been like outside. Last week, we looked at some birds found in Psalm 84 that made their nest in the eave troughs of the Sanctuary in Jerusalem. This week I want to take you on a hike.

As we begin, can I ask you to turn to the person beside and tell them where your favourite place to camp or hike is and what makes it so special to you? If you were to ask me what my favourite hike was, I would say it was the hike to the Plain of Six Glaciers that begins at Lake Louise. The hike begins at the beautiful Lake Louise Hotel. The path snakes around the prettiest lake in the world and then winds for four kilometers through trees, around Mount Lefroy and ends up at this breathtaking view at Abbot's Pass, where there just happens to be this wonderful tea house. As we take this trip today, can I have you imagine with me that we are following a short way behind a shepherd and his flock as they make this same trip just ahead of us? We are going to have in our hand Psalm 23, which was written by David the shepherd and king. The idea is to read this wonderful Psalm while watching the reactions of the sheep in the magnificent setting of our hike.

I believe that as David wrote this Psalm his mind went back to things he had discovered while taking care of sheep in the rough and rugged mountainous country in which he lived. I want to combine reading this familiar scripture with a hike because I think that some truths are better understood by observation, than just study.

SETTING:

The minute I mention Psalm 23, most of us have an emotional response to it. I bet most of you have this passage memorized; you have known it since you were a kid. You have found it gave you comfort when you were scared or you have felt it give amazing reassurance when you were sick in hospital or attended the funeral of someone you loved who had passed away. I have often gone to nursing homes, where due to Alzheimer's a person can't remember their own name, and yet the minute I start quoting these verses, immediately they repeat it word for word. And I watch a peace come over them. Let's go for a hike. The Psalm begins with:

I. A Place of Beauty

As you walk around Lake Louise you are immediately struck by the colour of the water; it is a milky soft blue colour. The colour comes from the fact that as the glaciers move it grinds up the limestone rock beneath it into a fine glacial silt known as 'rockflour' which then flows into the lake giving it this amazing soft blue color. Along the lakeshore are many mountain marsh plants and it isn't long until you turn a corner and begin walking through 200 ft. high trees. And then the path breaks out unto beautiful green hillsides and small meadows covered with lush green waste high grass. The meadows are silent except for the occasional whistle of a Hoary Marmot and it is there that you get your first view of the sheep and the shepherd. In the early morning warmth as the summer causes the dew to begin to evaporate off the green hill sides you see the sheep grazing under the watchful eye of the shepherd. Some sheep are still grazing, while others have started to feel the affects of the warmth of the sun on their backs and begin

to lie down, chew their cud and nod off to sleep. In the silence and peace of the moment the shepherd begins to think of his life and his God and he writes the following words in Psalm 23:1,2, *"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures."*

Such simple words but let's pull them apart and examine them. The term David uses here for God is Yahweh (it is the term for God, the all powerful creator of the universe and the one who is totally beyond us). For God was seen as being so far beyond us as people that we couldn't even mention His name out loud for fear of death (only once a year/ one priest/ in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem even said this word out loud.) Yet here, David says something astounding, *"The Great God of the Universe is MY shepherd."* It is one thing to say, *"God is Great;"* it is something completely different to say, *"He is my friend, the one who walks with me, personally cares for me, and is interested in my life. He who is Great enough to RULE the universe is CLOSE enough to care for me."* Also notice that it says, *"He IS my shepherd."* It is in the present tense.

Someone wrote this, *"I was regretting my past and fearing my future when suddenly my Lord was speaking. He said, 'I AM.'" He paused; I waited. He continued, "When you live in the past with its mistakes and regrets, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not 'I was'. When you live in the future with its problems and fears, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not 'I will be'. When You live in this moment it is not hard; I am there! My name is I am."* David was saying God is my shepherd in the present situations I face each and every day. Why? Because for some amazing reason, one I completely don't understand, God chose to be my Shepherd. He begins here because having the right shepherd is crucial to having a good life as a sheep.

A number of years ago someone in the Saskatchewan government had a 'great idea'; they thought that because many First Nations people love being outside, why not make them shepherds. So they bought a ranch near Moose Jaw, purchased a few hundred sheep and told six First Nations families that they are now the proud owners of a sheep ranch. Great idea. The only problem was these folks didn't like sheep, not even at supper time. I remember driving past their ranch and seeing the skinniest, saddest sheep you have ever seen with their heads stuck through the barbed wire fence trying to find some green grass to eat.

The words of the Psalmist made sense to me. David said let me begin by introducing you to my shepherd - He is God yet He IS MY shepherd. John 10:11 says, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* [Your shepherd died to make you his sheep]. John 10:14, *"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me."* And because He chose me, David says I know I shall not want (my needs will be cared for).

So he gives us two examples of that which you would be able to see from your view on our hike. First, you would see sheep who have been taken to green pastures and hillsides full of waist deep grass eating and then, having eaten their fill, sleeping in the warm summer sun on the hillside. Remember, David lived around Bethlehem a place that because of the hot summers had dry heat scorched grass. There would be no green grass for the sheep unless, like in southern Alberta the shepherd had worked hard to irrigate the field or that he had enough knowledge to know where the high alpine meadows were that would have been watered by the glaciers and mountain streams. And as David looked out at his sheep, eating green grass, feeling safe enough to lie down knowing that the shepherd would keep them safe, he looked at his life and said, *"As I look at my life I see that just as I found green pastures for my sheep, God has so*

graciously given me so many green pastures in my life. Things like my family, friends, healing during sickness, a home, a job, air to breath and lungs to breathe them with. I am indeed a blessed man.” When was the last time you stopped to thank God for the green pastures He has placed in your life?

You would also see a few sheep break away and wander down to the creek and because sheep won't drink from a running river, the shepherd, with a few branches, had created a quiet pool they could drink from and quench their thirst. David adds, *“As I watch them quench their thirst, I thought about how often You have Restored my soul.”* As Isaiah 53:6 says, *“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him (Jesus) the iniquity of us all.”* Aren't you glad that the Lord is willing to invite us back home and give us second and third chances to begin again and refresh us by His spirit so we can be forgiven and the strength that our sin took from us, be restored again? As we said last week, He guides me (again) in paths of righteousness. Psalm 84:3, *“How blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee, in whose heart are the highways to Zion (God).”* When we come back to the Lord, He opens up those pathways and highways which He had personally placed in our heart so we could experience God, have access to God and be feed by God himself.

As you look down at the scene of sheep in a green hillside and sheep drinking deep from the refreshing stream of God's care, it will warm your heart and you find yourself saying, *“I am so grateful that the Lord is my shepherd, that He has chosen me and I chose Him; I am truly a blessed person.”*

II. A Shadowy Gorge

It is around 3 o'clock when you hear the shepherd whistle and the sheep begin to stir and move back down into the forest. As they move along, the path seems to narrow and you find yourself feeling a little cooler as you are now walking in the shadow of a rocky gorge. The path takes you across some slippery shale skree and you are forced to hang onto a metal rope attached to the canyon wall. It isn't long until you find that the shadow caused by the rocks above you seems menacing and you start becoming concerned about where to put your foot next. It is then that you notice the sheep are bleating more, their eyes are darting around as if looking for a coyote or cougar hiding in the rock and they look ready to panic and run at any moment. And you remember David's words, *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”* (Psalm 23:4)

Did you notice the change that has just happened? In verses 1 to 3, sheep are walking in sunlight through delightful times. Now, in verse 4 the sheep are in shadows and dark times. Remember, sheep are timid, defenseless, and scare and stampede easily because they never know if a cougar may be laying in wait for them when they walk through a mountain gorge. But did you also notice that the pronouns David uses have also changed? In verses 1 to 3, he speaks about 'my shepherd and how He restores my soul' but when things get tough, David begins speaking directly to God and says, *“You are with me.”*

The shadowy walk of his sheep reminds David of a walk we will all have to take because unless the Lord returns, each of us will all have to face death. But notice the words David uses to describe the journey we will take. He does not say that as believers we will have to walk into death alone or that death can hold unto us. Instead,

he says that we will only have to walk through its shadow. He says that because Jesus conquered death on the cross. I Corinthians 15:55 says, *“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”*

Charles Spurgeon said, *“Just as the shadow of a dog can’t bite you. The shadow of a sword can’t cut you. And the shadow of death can’t destroy you; therefore, let us not be afraid.”* At the time of death, Jesus (the good shepherd) will take us by the hand and walk us through the shadow of death (we don’t stop, we don’t stay and we aren’t hurt as a shadow never really touches you) and because of that He says we simply walk with confidence through death (walking is what you do when you aren’t afraid and with someone who you know will protect you). So David would say, *“Trust your shepherd even when it comes to the time of our death or the death of someone we love.”*

Back to the hike; as your gaze went back to the sheep, all of a sudden you see the shepherd look up into the sky with a start. What he sees is an eagle and a couple vultures circling off to the left of the flock where a few ewes had wandered off to lie down in the deep grass. Instantly, the shepherd grabbed his rod (a stick with a weighted knob on the end) and his staff and runs toward his sheep. As he arrived, a coyote is making his finally approach to a fat pregnant ewe who is laying on its back unable to roll back unto her feet. At a full run, the shepherd throws his rod hitting the coyote in the head sending it rolling away and then he hooked his staff under the sheep and pulled it up right. As the coyote runs for his life, the shepherd straddled the sheep and began rubbing the ewes legs to get the circulation back into them. You see, if the sheep has too much wool on it or is it is very pregnant, it can end up rolling onto its back (the term is ‘Cast Down’) which results in the circulation being cut off to its legs and it becomes unable to get up and can end up easy prey for a coyote or simply suffocate to death. That is what David is talking about when he says in verse 4, *“Your rod and staff, they comfort me.”*

Have you ever been there? Either because of something you have gotten yourself into or because of some situation which has thrown you completely off balance and try as you might, you seem completely unable to catch your wind, right yourself or catch your feet again. If that is your situation, remember this passage; it says in Isaiah 40:11, *“He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.”* (Like a shepherd, He lift you up, hold unto you as you catch your balance again and He will help you get back on your feet.) He can do that because Philippians 4:19 says, *“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”* His protective rod and His supportive staff will be there for you.

III. The Tea House

As you walk on the path toward the Plain of Six Glaciers, all of a sudden you turn a corner and in front of you is a Tea House. It is a rustic cabin, which is staffed by a number of summer workers who will sell you hot tea, coffee, cool lemonade with chocolate chip cookies scones and jam or hot Apple crumble pie. As you sit down to rest your weary legs, check your blisters, look at a view which will knock your wool kicking socks off. In front of you is a huge canyon wall, massive blue and white Mount Victoria hanging glaciers and Abbot’s Pass. And as you sit there, you will often hear what sounds like gun shots as huge pieces of ice or rock break off and careen hundreds

of feet to the valley floor below. You are astounded by the meal and overwhelmed by the view and overjoyed that you have finally arrived at your destination.

Psalm 23:5, 6, *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."* One of the commentaries I read surprised me when it said that possibly Psalm 23 was written NOT during a great time in David's life but a time when everything was NOT going well. Maybe just after his son had engineered a coup to kick David off the throne. And this Psalm was written by David, who was in the middle of a tough time, forcing himself to look back at how God had always been part of his life. How, despite how difficult things were right then, if he looked back he could see that God had given him many green pastures, restored his soul and refreshed his spirit and given him still water times in his life. How God had promised him safety in death and as verse 5 says there had even been times when God had prepared His table, (cared for him/ actually spoiled him) he felt like his enemies were all around him. David realized that even during those tough times, God had prepared spiritual, practical banquets for him in his life.

When it mentions that his shepherd anointed his head with oil, it could mean 2 different things. First, when you are invited as a special guest to someone's house .. they would often anoint you with a perfumed oil on your head as a sign that you were much loved by your host. So God was overwhelming David with his generosity. Or, if it is speaking of the actions of a shepherd for their sheep - it describes how oil is used to heal a wound or keep away the pesky bugs of mid summer. It speaks of God protective healing hand and guarding hand in our lives .. at work even when we can't see it.

And when he mentions my cup overflows, it means that when God blesses him, it is like a person keeps on pouring the wine or coffee in your cup to the point of overflowing; his life overflows with good things. And because that has been the pattern that he has seen in his life, he is convinced that the goodness and mercy of God will follow him all the days of his life. Can I remind you of Philippians 1:6, *"I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion."* and Matthew 28:20, *"Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

The Psalm ends in the fall as the shepherd rounds up his sheep and heads home for the winter. The barn has been weather proofed, the hay bales are in the loft and the pens are ready and David says, *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days on my life and then I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* At the end of our life heaven is waiting, promised and guaranteed. And just like the Tea House at the end of the hike at the Plain of Six Glaciers, you will be astounded by what you will be given, overwhelmed by the view and overjoyed that you have finally arrived at your destination.

There was a contest in London in which a considerable prize was being offered. The contest was simply to choose who could recite Psalm 23 the best. Different people recited the Psalm with varying degrees of success. Then, one of England's greatest orators, rose and with flawless annunciation-waxed eloquent. When he finished he received a thunderous applause and a standing ovation. The final contestant was an old man who slowly, quietly spoke the words of the Psalm - occasionally stumbling and with halting speech he quoted the Psalm. When he was finished, all was quiet, some wept and in the end he was declared the winner. When the contest was over the orator came up to the old man and asked what was the secret of his success. To which the man replied, *"You knew the Psalm. I know the Shepherd."* The key to the power of this

Psalm is found in David's first line, "*The Lord is MY shepherd, therefore I will not want.*"
The promises of this Psalm is only for those who know the shepherd not just the Psalm.
Do you know Him? Only then can the wonders of this hike be yours.

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