

# The Lord Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign

Matt Matthews & Tracy Dace

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Sermon notes . . .

**Matt:** The first five words of this psalm form the center of the faith for many, many Jews and Christians: *The Lord is my shepherd.*

None other than God almighty watches over me. God cares for me. God guides me. That's what shepherds do: they guide, they protect, they heal, They teach, they encourage, they comfort, they take care of the flock.

Thank God, I am one of God's sheep, and thank God, the Lord is my shepherd.

This affirmation is all many of us need. This affirmation brings rest, and joy, and comfort, and light, and comfort, and warmth.

These are the only words of faith many of us need.

Glory, glory, alleluia.

**Tracy:** But WAIT.

What about verse four?

I agree with you about the first five words. *The Lord is my shepherd*—those words bring tremendous comfort and inspiration. Yes, we can rest in God. Yes, we can trust God. Yes, we can lean on God. Yes, we are in good hands.

But what about verse four?

What about the valley of the shadow of death? What about the darkest valley?

**Matt:** I don't want to think about verse four. Who wants to talk about the valley of the shadow of death? Let's talk about green pastures and still waters. Those are peaceful scenes.

**Tracy:** We must go there, to the valley of the shadow of death. The psalmist does. The psalmist is aware of this. We should be, too.

When I take off my blinders and look at our community, I see more than still waters and green pastures.

I see: (tell us what you see. Give an assessment of the community you are trying to serve. Give an assessment about the "valleys" in which your families struggle. You might want to repetitively use a phrase like "I see..." or some other repetition. For example:)

- I see The valley of the shadow of death.
- I see people who have good reason to lose hope.
- I see gun violence, and the way that violence ripples deeply into the lives of our DREAAAM kids.

- I see children and families seized by trauma.
- I see the effects of mental illness.
- I see families who are struggling economically.

I see the valley of the shadow of death.

I see the darkest valley.

**Matt:** So those first five words are all the more important to return to: *The Lord is my shepherd.*

**Tracy:** Yes, those words are a great, great comfort. I have hope precisely because of those words. I have hope because the Lord is my shepherd.

**Matt:** Tracy, you and I have talked before about the mentors that God has sent to us to shepherd us. Tell me about some of the shepherds that have guided and encouraged you.

**Tracy:**

- God has shepherded me through the witness and encouragement of . . . Dorothy Chesser
- God has shepherded me through the witness and encouragement of . . . Alpha Phi Alpha
- God has shepherded me through the witness and encouragement of . . . the people with whom I worked in the chancellor's office of the Univ of Mississippi.
- God has shepherded me through the witness and encouragement of . . . Dr. Brenda Townsend Walker.
- God has shepherded me through the witness and encouragement of . . . Dr. Samuel L. Wright.
- God has shepherded me through the witness and encouragement of . . . First Presbyterian.
- God has shepherded me through the witness and encouragement of . . . Claudia Kirby.
- God has shepherded me through the witness and encouragement of . . . Alonzo Johnson.
- God has shepherded me through the witness and encouragement of . . . Bob Lupton.

Jesus is "The Good Shepherd," and I have seen the face of Jesus in the faces of these and other people. I know the Lord *is* my shepherd, because he has sent me these people to encourage me.

**Matt:** "I am the good shepherd," Jesus says in John's gospel. A good shepherd—a really good one—will lay down his life for his flock. This is the kind of sacrifice Jesus invites us to make on behalf of others. This is the kind of elbow grease Jesus wants us to put into loving one another. Dare we trust him that far? Dare we follow him that far? Dare we risk loving our community that much?

That's what shepherds do: they guide, they protect, they heal, they teach, they encourage, they comfort, they take care of the flock.

I thank God that you, Tracy, are a shepherd for so many of the boys and girls in our community, and the various staff with whom you work. God has used and is using you in a powerful way.

M: The Lord is my shepherd.

M & T: I shall not want.

T: The Lord leads me to places of comfort and rest.

M: To places of respite and relaxation.

T: To dinners at Neil Street Blues.

M: To concerts at Krannert.

T: To off-beat movies at the Virginia Theatre.

M: To the bounty of the blooming flowers of spring.

T: The Lord also leads me to places of hurt.

M: To people who don't share the same privileges as me.

T: To families who sometimes struggle.

M: To people who could use a friend.

M: The Lord leads me to dinner celebrations, basketball games, high-five-experiences of great joy.

T: And the Lord leads me through struggles, through headlines I'd rather avoid, to work on and through systems that need reform

M: The Lord wants me to walk with people who struggle.

T: The Lord blesses me to be a blessing in my community.

M: The Lord catches me when I fall.

T: The Lord encourages me when I am afraid.

M: The Lord chastises me when I am lazy.

T: The Lord inspires me when I am lethargic.

M: The Lord calls me to be a healer.

T: The Lord is my shepherd.

M & T: Alleluia.