

**Dec. 4, 2011**

## **2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY SHEPHERD**

Last week, we began Advent season by asking the question, “Who is this baby?” And the first answer we explored was Jesus’ identity as Lord. Something I omitted last week was the fact that those who are subject to a lord as their master are completely at the mercy of that person’s decisions. As a servant, you hope your lord make decisions based on what is in the best interests of the people he rules. However, a lord can do whatever he wants, choosing to start wars for the sake of his glory, or tax the people unfairly so that he has more income for his own pleasures.

Fortunately, Psalm 23 reminds us exactly what kind of lord we have in God: “The Lord is my shepherd.” And as we pose again the question, “Who is this baby,” the answer is “Shepherd.”

As a child, I actually was very confused by the King James rendition of Psalm 23:1. I read, “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want” and thought it meant we weren’t supposed to want God as our Lord or shepherd. I was so happy when I got a Living Bible in the 1970s that finally helped me understand what the sentence really meant: “Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need.”

Maybe “I shall not want” is a better translation for 2011, however, when we consider how culture teaches us to want everything. On Thanksgiving, the commercials for children's toys flooded the television. And after each ad, one or both of our oldest granddaughters would respond with, “I want that!”

We adults are guilty of also responding with “I want that!” to each new high-tech device introduced to us. Consider stories of persons crushed on Black Friday as they tried to be the first through the doors, or the woman who used pepper spray to make sure she got the item she HAD

to have. What does it say about Christmas when we use it to excuse for our bad behavior to get things? What does it say when the things we used to consider to be luxuries are now necessities?

That's why it is good to remember the second half of Psalm 1: I shall not want. When God is our shepherd, God will provide everything we really need. Like a shepherd, God will provide for us, protect us and guide us because God loves us.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures." One of the hardest jobs for a shepherd is to rotate pastures where the sheep may feed. If sheep return day after day to the same field, after awhile that is the only place they will go. Even if their field is trodden down and not a sprig of grass is there, or lush pasture beckons just 100 yards away – once a sheep develops ruts toward one field, he will go to that field alone. A good shepherd constantly finds new green pastures to keep the sheep fed.

"He leads me beside still waters." A sheep that wanders into deep waters quickly gets into trouble. The animal registers no concern as it wades into the middle of a lake or stream. But within seconds, its wool becomes so heavy from the water, a sheep cannot stand in the current, will be pulled underwater and drown.

That's why a shepherd needs to know where the still waters reside: places of quiet, shallow water where a sheep can walk in and get a drink of life-giving water without danger.

"He leads me in right paths for his name sake." Unlike livestock around here, shepherds in early Palestine did not have fences to help contain the sheep. In July 2005, a group of shepherds thought their flock was safe, and so took a break a short distance from the sheep. One of the animals started up a trail and went off the edge of a cliff, and almost 1,500 animals

followed. The first one hadn't recognized the danger as it led the way; the others simply followed the tail ahead of it.<sup>1</sup> A shepherd has to lead down a right trail for the safety of the flock.

In light of all of this, when we affirm, "He restores my soul." As we consider all the ways God provides just what we need for daily living – food, water and guidance – we could say God keeps us alive.

Yet like a shepherd, God's work isn't done at the end of the day. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff comfort me." Sheep are one of the most defenseless creatures there are. They do not have sharp teeth or claws, nor do they have body mass that would deter a predator – two or four legged. Sheep are totally dependent upon the shepherd for protection from wild animals.

That's why the shepherd has a complete arsenal of tools just for protection. There is the slingshot that we remember from the story of David and Goliath. The shepherd also used his rod – a baseball-bat like club – to strike at anything threatening the flock. He also used the rod at night to make every animal pass slowly underneath it as the sheep entered a cave for safekeeping. The rod helped a shepherd to notice an animal that was injured, or had a parasite in its wool, or even as he counted to notice that a sheep was missing.

Finally, the staff was the long stick with the crook on the end. Most often, a shepherd used it to pull a sheep back to safety if it fell down on a ledge. However, a shepherd could use his staff for defense if push came to shove.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Timothy S. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks* (SheepLeader Publications, [www.ShepherdLeader.com](http://www.ShepherdLeader.com)), p. 201.

And that's when the true worth of a shepherd was discovered. When a wild animal threatened, the hired hands would run away, leaving a sheep to the claws of a wild animal or the hands of a thief. A hired hand had no investment in the flock, and wouldn't risk injury for it.

But the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The people primarily raised sheep for their wool, not for their meat. Because of this, a shepherd knew each sheep for its lifespan of many years. Most shepherds named their sheep and came to know them individually – and to care for them. So when danger came in the form of a wolf or a thief, the shepherd would risk his life for the well-being of the flock. And sometimes, the shepherd would die in his effort.

And to what end? So that the animal will know hospitality beyond just provision for its basic needs. “Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

So, who is the baby we seek to honor at Christmas? Jesus is our Shepherd; we shall not be in want.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures.” Remember how Jesus had the 5,000 men plus women and children sit down on the grass before he did the miracle that fed all of them?

“He leads me besides still waters.” When Jesus met the woman at the well, he told her that all who drank from that well would be thirsty again. However, the water he offered would quench her thirst forever. Jesus identified himself as living water.

“He leads me in right paths.” Instead of ignoring Zacchaeus and the woman caught in adultery and all the others classified as sinners, Jesus showed each one how to get back on track in their lifestyles and in their spiritual journeys, that they might honor God.

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for thou art with me.” Like a good shepherd, Jesus laid down his life for us. He did so not only so we could have abundant life in this life, but also in the life to come. Instead of allowing a valley of pain, grief and suffering to separate us from God, Jesus demonstrated that God’s love for us is so deep that nothing can separate us from his love – for Jesus is like a shepherd willing to risk his life for the sheep he knows by name, and the sheep he loves.

After the resurrection Jesus’ last instructions to the disciples were, “Feed my sheep.” Even today, we have that shepherd providing for us, guiding us and protecting us. And heaven knows, we need that shepherd.

Without God, we as humans get into ruts that lead us away from green pastures. We as humans get in over our heads before we know it. We as humans wander blindly down whatever path is before us, simply following those who went before us without a true understanding of the danger that could lie ahead. And we as humans are often defenseless in the face of real evil including death.

But praise be to God: This baby who is coming in a few weeks was a shepherd whose desire was to help us understand God’s deep love for us – a love so deep that he wants us to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Jesus can be our Lord and our shepherd, and simply awaits our decision to join his flock.