

Today, we are going to start with a quiz. Don't panic. We'll figure it out together. Are you ready? (SLIDE) The Bible is divided into how many parts? (2) Called the..? (Old Testament and New Testament) How many books are there? (66) How many pages? I have no idea...it depends on the Bible. How many psalms there are? 150! Last one: what is the most recognized psalm? Psalm 23. Regardless of the translation you prefer, the 23rd Psalm is possibly the most recognized *chapter* in the entire Bible. It brings us comfort in times of despair and hope in the midst of life's darkness. It is good news. When said alone, or together with others, the poetry is sacred and special. Say the first line with me, (SLIDE) **"The Lord is my Shepherd."**

I remember the times when I have said these holy promises: at Camp Wapo, helping kids memorize the verses when I was a counselor years ago. At United Hospital, when as a chaplain I visited a couple who held their deceased 23-week-old baby in their arms as they wept. I remember saying them at my friend Brian's ordination, right before he was officially given the title of pastor, a word derived from the noun "shepherd." Most vividly, I remember proclaiming them a year ago today, in the Salbers living room, sitting with their heartbroken family after we lost Ron to an act of suicide. Our hearts continue to grieve the loss of this great man, his life ended too soon. In many ways, these moments feel like ages ago. In other ways, it feels like yesterday. We miss Ron, and we miss our other loved ones, those who have died recently, and those whose passing continues to be heartbreaking years later. Perhaps you, too, can recall those holy moments when the promises of Psalm 23 were shared. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me. **The Lord is...my shepherd.**

If the Lord is my shepherd, that makes us what? (SLIDE) Sheep. I know only two things about sheep. 1. Wool. 2. Rack of Lamb. I wear wool, I eat meat. That's it. Sheep are entirely outside of my experience, so I did a little research. If you go to a circus, you see lots of animals: lions, tigers, and bears...oh my! But you never see sheep. You know why? Because sheep are...well, they're not so bright. They aren't easily trained, and they can't survive in the wild alone. Cats, dogs, birds, horses, even cows, if you set them loose in the wild will survive. They'll get smart, they might get thin, but they'll get by. Sheep? Sheep get eaten.

(SLIDE) In the wild, there are four ways for animals to survive: put up a fight, flee the scene, get into a threatening posture, or simply submit. How do sheep stack up? Fight: Sheep have neither offensive nor defensive weapons. No fangs, no claws, no shell, no spray, nothing. On the upside, they do come with about 8 pounds of fluffy stuff all over their body. On the downside, they can be grabbed pretty much anywhere and dragged to the ground by their enemies.

What about flight? For starters, sheep are slow. Their eyesight is as poor as their hearing. They aren't strong, have low stamina, and no sense of direction. Sheep don't blend into *anything*. So even if they could run, they can't hide.

How about posture? Dogs bark, cats hiss, rattlesnakes rattle, sheep, what? (Baaa!) "Baa...Please don't eat me, please don't eat me!" Fearful, ewes! Dogs raise their hair, cats arch their back, rattlesnakes coil. What can sheep do? Well, it's hard to puff up when you're already fluffy ball of wool!

What about submission? (SLIDE) Sheep know one trick and one trick only. They flock. They know this: If you see another sheep, get closer, and don't bump into anyone. Here's how it works. One sheep spots a wolf and starts running. Let's give the sheep a name (?). The other sheep don't

want to be alone so they start running with (?). They keep running until they get tired, the wolf stops to eat (?) and they live to baa another day. That's it. That's their entire survival strategy. Please don't eat me. Eat (?) He's tasty. Run awaaaay!

And God says, "That's you." That's all of us! Regardless of how we look, or how much money is in our bank account, or how old we are, we are like sheep, lowly, not always so bright, stubborn, sometimes even a little stinky. It's the language of the Psalms, and it's the language of Jesus, when he calls himself (SLIDE) the good shepherd in John 10. He is the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Even when sheep have a shepherd around they're not safe because they will still get lost, trapped, even drown. Pick another animal, we say, any other animal! But God says, "Nope. You're a sheep. And I am your shepherd." **The Lord is...my shepherd.**

The Bible mentions three kinds of shepherds: the hired hand, the bad shepherd, and the good shepherd. The **hired hand** does the bare minimum: feeds, waters, and when the wolf comes, runs for his own safety. The **bad shepherd** pushes the flock from behind and smacks them to keep them in line. The sheep survive, but don't thrive. The **good shepherd** knows his flock, and they know him. He leads them, so that whatever attacks has to go through him first. He calls them by name and they come. The good shepherd is their guide through danger, their gate to safety, their rescue when lost, their healing when hurt. This shepherd is their lifeline. **The Lord is...my shepherd.**

(SLIDE) Psalm 23 reminds us that we have a lifeline. But it's not just an end-of-line lifeline, it's the promise that in God, we have everything we need, right now, because Emmanuel, is with us. We really lack nothing, in fact, our cup overflows. But this understanding is so counter-cultural. We say "**The Lord is...my shepherd.**" We've read them, delighted in them, clung to them, but do we really trust them? Let's be honest. I shall not want? I lack nothing? Our whole life is about wanting: I want, I

shop, I look, I wish, I pray, and when I finally get what I want, I want even more. I will never stop my wanting because I am continually discovering new things that I think I need.

What do think you still need? (SLIDE) Maybe the better question is, “What really matters that you don’t have?” What, in the end, would you dare not lack? I am going to go out on a limb here and say when we draw our final breaths, our thoughts will not be about iPhones or gadgets, vacation homes or cars, the size of our jeans or the money we have in savings. They’ll be about loved ones and God. The one and only thing that can cause us to say, “I shall not want,” is God, nothing else, period. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who loves unconditionally, forgives freely, and blesses abundantly.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, (SLIDE) the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for God is with me. Easy to say on Sunday morning, harder to trust the rest of the week. We live with the realities of broken relationships, anger issues, fear, racism, sexism, classism. We see news stories of senseless shootings and political deals that make us wonder how our nations even got to a place that requires a nuclear plan. We have hungry and homeless neighbors. Our hearts continue to ache as we mourn Ron’s death, and so many others, who have died because of mental illness. This is just the tip of the iceberg. We grieve for dreams shattered and hopes denied. We ask ourselves, “Where is the Good Shepherd now?”

But we are reminded today sin and evil do not have the last word. We are to fear not. (SLIDE) Even when we don’t understand and cry out, God is here. We remember that we, and this world, have been marked with the cross of Christ forever, and, in the end, love wins. Life prevails. We believe our hope is eternal. The Son—S-O-N shines through. (SLIDE) There is more light than darkness. The Lord *is* your shepherd who leads you, restores you, prepares a table for you, and even in the darkest

moments, promises goodness and mercy all of your life. You shall dwell in the house of the Lord, with Ron and all of God's children, forever.

I found a poem from Erin Wathen called Psalm 23-and-a-half. (SLIDE) I'd like to close with an adapted version I hope you will find as meaningful as I do.

The Lord is my shepherd, whether I like it or not.

I shall not want, not even for a bigger house, a nicer car, a slimmer waistline, a better grade, a little more success, or to always be right.

He makes me lie down in green pastures as the world moves busily through each day and grays with illness and brokenness.

He leads me beside still waters, even when I pull away and make a run for the choppy sea of my own thoughts and desires.

He restores my soul, bringing wholeness and joy. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake... (SLIDE)

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; even as I live with, and log on and tune in to the news of violence, despair and death.

For you are with me as the world spins in chaos and wonder,
Your rod and your staff—they comfort me. They tell me a better story and call me back to your side.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies and ask only that I sit and dine with them.

You anoint my head with oil; and call me to live an abundant life reflective of your blessings.

My cup overflows, with gratitude.

(SLIDE)

Despite my wandering and fearful ways, I know that goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

Even now. Even on the worst day, the worst week, the worst moment.

I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long,

Singing a new song, and telling the Good Shepherd's story.

(SLIDE)

People of God, **The Lord is your shepherd.** Thanks be to God! Amen