

Psalms: Confidence in God's Presence Sunday, 7/4/21

Last week we saw how the Psalms affirm that God's law is good and good for us, inviting us to live like fruitful trees planted by a river. When we learn to see God's law pointing us to the teachings and life of Jesus, we can embrace both God's law and grace, perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. This week, we'll join the psalmist in confidently proclaiming God's unfailing presence in all aspects of our lives. There's nothing we or anyone else can do to separate us from the love of God.

As we read our next Psalm together responsively, be listening for words and images that convey the closeness of God. We'll be reading the first 18 verses of Psalm 139 in the New Living Translation. Please join in where you see the bolded words.

{Read Psalm 139:1-18 NLT}

In Psalm 139, we hear a very personal confession of faith that describes a relationship with God that's ultimately intimate, pervasive, and persistent. God isn't just present in the life of the psalmist, but God encompasses the entirety of the psalmist's life. God knows our heart and our actions, no matter our location, whether we're awake or sleeping, or even alive or dead. So complete is God's presence, that it spans all time, even from before our conception. It's a presence that's characterized by blessing, supportive strength, and thoughtful caring.

I want you to take a moment to reflect on some of the exclamations of praise and wonder offered by the psalmist. Have you ever praised God with affirmations like these? "You place your hand of blessing on my head...[Y]our strength will support me...Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it...You saw me before I was born...How precious are your thoughts about me, O God." These aren't the words of someone casually acquainted with God, are they? Do you have that kind of awareness of God's presence in your life? If not, would you like it? God doesn't have to remain a distant figure on a throne to you. All along, God's intention has been to walk along with us through life's journeys, guiding us, protecting us, and providing for us, like a shepherd tends a flock of sheep.

Let's take a deeper dive into the 23rd Psalm, which we heard earlier this morning. The Scriptures repeatedly refer to God's people as sheep, underscoring our great dependence on God's presence. Why sheep? Not because they're particularly noble animals. Sheep aren't

the most intelligent; they're prey animals, vulnerable to predators. That's why the shepherd carried a rod, a sort of club to beat off lions and wolves. Sheep have a tendency to wander off, which is why shepherds carried a staff, to guide the sheep in the right direction. Sheep are totally dependent on their shepherd for food and shelter and safety, which is why Matthew tells us that Jesus, when he saw the crowds "had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."¹ Zechariah writes, "So my people are wandering like lost sheep; they are attacked because they have no shepherd."² And Isaiah laments, "All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own."³ Thirteen of the Psalms mention sheep or shepherds. King David was a shepherd before he was anointed to be King, and before his brave encounter with Goliath, David told of rescuing lambs from the jaws of lions and bears.⁴ The birth of Jesus was announced to shepherds who were out in the fields with their sheep. And most importantly, Jesus himself laid claim to the title of the "good shepherd."⁵

If being compared to sheep isn't especially flattering, we can at least take comfort in the image of the Good Shepherd. We know from the 23rd Psalm some of the essential benefits that a good shepherd brings to a flock of sheep. Food and water, rest in green pastures, and still waters, are things that sheep, unlike goats, can't manage to find on their own. Just like sheep, we depend on Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to provide us with our daily bread, all the things we need to thrive in the course of our day. By the way, have you ever wondered why the waters of the 23rd Psalm are still? Sheep don't like moving water. They can swim, but their wool gets waterlogged and they're not great swimmers.

What is the daily bread that you depend on from God? Is it a job, a place to live, a loving relationship, clean water, three square meals? It's easy to chew and swallow our way through each day without ever taking the time to recall with thanksgiving the loving hand of the Good Shepherd who provides you with the basic stuff of life that sustains you.

And why is it that Jesus makes us to lie down in green pastures? Sheep can't digest

¹ Matthew 9:36. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

² Zechariah 10:2. Ibid.

³ Isaiah 53:6. Ibid.

⁴ 1 Samuel 17:34-37

⁵ John 10:11. Ibid.

grass completely until they lie down, and sometimes they don't have the sense to do so on their own. Can you see how this Psalm might be a parable for us? Even over 24 hours, there is such a thing as too much of something, even good things: too much food, too much work, too much sun, too much talking, too much sitting around, even too much Netflix or Fortnite. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he knows what we need in good measure, and he teaches us healthy rhythms of life.

But we need more than our daily bread to sustain us. We also need to be guided along right paths. We need to know that God is present when we face dark times, even death. We need deliverance from our enemies. Those simply aren't things that we can expect to receive from a God who isn't so present in our lives that he might as well be a shepherd holding us, little lambs in his arms.

The last verse in the Psalm speaks especially to this closeness: "Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever." But what is "the house of the Lord?" It certainly didn't mean "heaven" in its original context, but rather the Temple. Why the Temple? Because that's where God was believed to be present, and that's where God's people travelled to be close to God and to affirm their relationship with God and God's people. Perhaps a better translation of the verse for us today might be "and I will live in God's presence forever." The good news is that living in God's presence is something we can enjoy forever. But the peace of God's presence doesn't have to wait for the end of this life. Would you like to enjoy some of that peace today? All you have to do is ask.

We need the presence of the Good Shepherd, because without him, we're prone to become so focused on eating grass that we become oblivious to the sheep around us and wander off, far from the flock. Sheep really do this, which is why Jesus gave us the parable about the lost sheep. If you've got a smart phone in your pocket, it's much harder to get lost than it used to be. But Jesus wasn't talking about that kind of lostness. The Good Shepherd seeks out those who are spiritually lost, those who are looking for their daily bread from something or someone other than Jesus. God has every right to sit on the divine throne and insist we come to God, but that's not what the Good Shepherd does. How great the love of God must be for us, the sheep of God's flock, that Jesus would leave the ninety-nine and go

after the one who is lost!

I wonder if there are ways in which you're lost today. If we're honest, we'll admit that it's possible to be lost without even knowing it! What are some signs that you might be lost, that you might have strayed too far from the Good Shepherd? A feeling of emptiness inside that you can't seem to fill or satisfy is one sign. An abundant harvest of what I'd call the "anti-fruit of the Spirit" is another, like irritability, violence of words, feelings, or actions, or a loss of desire to serve others in love. Sometimes when you're lost in the woods, you can find your way by setting out in one direction and hoping you come to a landmark like a road or a lake. But when we're spiritually lost, we don't need to find a landmark so much as a person. We need to return to the Good Shepherd, the one who sends us the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and bear good fruit. To do that, we may need help from our sisters and brothers in the flock. Spent any time with the flock recently? It's not too late to return.

We all, like sheep, need to stay close to the Good Shepherd. Jesus alone offers his life completely for the sake of the sheep. Jesus alone is uniquely qualified to make peace for us with God. Jesus alone is capable of being both the Good Shepherd of his flock and the sacrificial lamb without blemish, offered that we might find our way back to God's sheepfold.

Whether you're confidently enjoying God's presence today, or lost somewhere in the wilderness, I invite you to join me in prayer as we ask to be made more aware of the presence of the Good Shepherd. Let us pray.

Ever-present God, teach us to recognize your voice and to see your hand at work in our world. Focus our attention when you place your hand of blessing on our heads. Strengthen our obedience when you guide us on paths that are different from the ones we might choose on our own. May we experience the wonder of your presence with each breath we take in, reveling in your Holy Spirit and offering our lives to you in thanksgiving. Amen.

Please take some time now to reflect on your trust in God's presence.



Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com