

Psalm 23

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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A Psalm of Care in the Chaos

I'm here today before you to confess two addictions — not often you hear a sermon start that way — and they're both social media videos that I'm addicted to.

The first is any video that shows a person taking care of a disastrous lawn situation, and they just fast forward and clean the whole thing. Now, you know, I'm not alone on this. Some of you know the joy, just the satisfaction, of watching chaos be turned into beauty.

And then there's the other ones. And some of you I know are addicted to these as well. It's a modern day shepherd on his four-wheeler, and he's got that border collie in the back. And that border collie just has a crazed look on its face, because it cannot wait to bolt into that field and round those sheep up and get them into the right place. And that modern day shepherd just says one word, the border collie is out, and it rounds up the sheep.

Such satisfaction.

And so when I read about this shepherd, I have to tell you, my mind went to a four-wheeler before I went to someone holding a staff in the middle of some verdant pasture. But this, this song just brings up so much for me, and I bet it does for you, as well.

As a child, every day, I counted down the seconds to 5:00 p.m. most days — from toddlerhood through about fourth grade — because that's when *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* came on.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" was cross-stitched on a wall plaque in our home. But in the chaos of my dramatic, sometimes violent family system, the idea of a gentle shepherd felt more like fantasy than faith.

And then came Mr. Rogers — soft-spoken, steady, and kind. When he said, "*I like you just the way you are,*" or "*You've made this day a special day just by being you,*" or reminded me that "*it's okay to cry,*" they felt like words from that shepherd I longed for. Words that led me to green pastures in the middle of emotional wilderness.

It was an invitation to be fully human, a rare oasis in the desert of my childhood.

And while Psalm 23 is designed to bring care amid our chaos, it does so not as a comforting poem, but as a declaration of resistance. A counter-narrative. A protest song disguised as a pastoral hymn.

In the chaos of our world — war, ecological collapse, economic anxiety, and the fractures within our families and communities — Psalm 23 is not sentimental nostalgia. It is revolutionary assurance. This means Psalm 23 is not naïve. It imagines an alternative grounded in trust, provision, and presence rather than domination or scarcity.

Point 1: The Shepherd Provides (verses 1–3)

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." This verse could easily be dismissed as idealism. But it's not. It is a bold declaration. In the Hebrew, the phrase "I shall not want" suggests something deeper than material contentment. It implies wholeness. Enoughness. A rejection of the consumer myth that we are always lacking, always behind, always in need of more.

To say "I shall not want" is to say: I will not be enslaved by scarcity. I will not live out of fear. I will trust the Shepherd to guide me into enough — not excess, not poverty — but enough. It's a quiet rebellion against the scarcity and anxiety that shape so much of our world.

Notice also that the shepherd doesn't suggest rest. He *makes* us lie down. It's as if the psalmist knows that we resist rest. We want to earn our keep. Prove our worth. Hustle our way to heaven.

But this Shepherd interrupts all of that.

The green pastures and still waters are not luxuries; they are lifelines. They represent the restoration that our souls long for in a society that demands productivity over presence. They echo the biblical call to Sabbath, a resistance to Pharaoh's endless bricks, a reminder that we are more than what we produce.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Catholic priest, professor, and spiritual writer, once wrote that we are tempted to believe three great lies: that you are what you do, you are what you own, and you are what others think of you. These illusions drive our anxiety, our burnout, and our disconnection.

But the shepherd in Psalm 23 leads us away from those traps. The green pastures and still waters are not just about rest. They are about remembering who we truly are: beloved, enough, and already held, regardless of achievement, possessions, or approval.

In our congregations, in our communities, in our lives, how might we create green pastures for one another? What does it look like to cultivate spaces of rest, refuge, and renewal, not just for ourselves, but for those pushed to the margins by systems of oppression? How might this lovely campus and sanctuary be used in this way?

Point 2: The Shepherd Is Present (verse 4)

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me."

This is the beating heart of the psalm. It doesn't say, "If I walk through the valley." It says, "*Even though* I walk." Because valleys are inevitable. Shadow places are real. Grief, illness, trauma, injustice — these are not detours. They are part of the path.

The shepherd of Psalm 23 does not orchestrate fear or terror; the Shepherd accompanies the vulnerable, especially those forced to walk through the valley of systemic cruelty. We are called to witness, to lament, and to walk alongside the oppressed, the undocumented, and the afraid, echoing the shepherd's own steadfast presence. Because this shepherd walks *through* it with us. Presence is the promise. Not the absence of pain, but the assurance of accompaniment.

During National Refugee Day, Bishop (formerly Cardinal) Pham of San Diego — himself a Vietnam refugee — led a group of faith leaders to the downtown federal courthouse to support families attending immigration hearings. As they walked through halls filled with distraught hope, ICE agents stood by in masks. But when Bishop Pham and the group joined those families in prayer and solidarity, witnesses say ICE waited, then quietly backed away.

It was a powerful moment: a bishop accompanying the vulnerable, and a system — momentarily — yielding to presence, not force. It reminds us that, like the shepherd of Psalm 23, our call is to be there in those shadowed places, bearing witness, lamenting injustice, and walking together.

And notice how the psalm shifts from third person ("He leads me") to second person ("You are with me"). It's intimate. That's why this verse has echoed through hospital rooms, war zones, prison cells, and lonely hearts. And it still speaks: You are not alone. Not in your depression. Not in your diagnosis. Not in your divorce. Not in your doubt. Not in your middle school classroom. Not in your night anxieties. You are not alone.

In a chaotic and unjust world, presence matters. In fact, it may be the most revolutionary gift we can offer. Being with others in their pain, without rushing to fix

or explain, is itself an act of resistance against a culture of avoidance. In this way, we are invited not only to receive God's presence, but to embody it for one another.

What valleys are people around you walking through? Are we willing to go there with them? This one way we mimic with our lives, the good shepherd of Psalm 23 and John 10.

Point 3: The Shepherd Honors and Pursues (verses 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 mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."

This is not just survival. This is abundance in the face of opposition. God doesn't remove the enemies; God sets a table in their presence. This is scandalous grace. It's not escapism. It's dignity.

To anoint someone's head with oil was a sign of honor and hospitality. The cup that overflows is not material wealth — it's the overflowing love, worth, and affirmation of the shepherd. Even when others seek to shame us, God honors us. Even when others try to define us by our worst day, our shepherd prepares a feast.

This scene calls to mind the final act of the film *Babette's Feast*, where a mysterious French refugee prepares an extravagant meal for a small, austere religious community in Denmark. The feast, which at first seems excessive or even wasteful, becomes a moment of deep grace and reconciliation. The table, much like the one in Psalm 23, becomes a sacrament of love — lavish, healing, and inclusive. In both the psalm and the film, abundance is not about wealth; it's about the generosity that defies fear, mistrust, and judgment. It's a reminder that God's table is not just prepared — it overflows.

And the word "follow" in Hebrew is better translated as "pursue." Goodness and mercy are not lagging behind, hoping to catch up. They are chasing us down. God's grace is not passive. It's relentless. Maybe it's chasing you down right now, and that's why you are here, or still here.

What would it look like to live as if goodness and mercy were actively pursuing us? How might that change our posture toward the world? Our relationships? Ourselves?

Conclusion: A Psalm for This Moment

Psalm 23 doesn't promise an escape from the world's pain. It promises that we do not face it alone. Walter Brueggemann called Psalm 23 a counter-testimony — an act

of trust in a world that teaches fear. It imagines the world not as it is, but as it is *promised* to be: shaped by care, not control; sufficiency, not striving; presence, not abandonment.

So what valleys are you walking through this week? What voices of scarcity or fear are you hearing? Where do you need to remember that the Shepherd provides, even when you feel lost or lacking?

Where are you being called to presence — not just to know God is with you — but to be that presence for someone else? Whose valley might you step into, not to fix, but to simply accompany?

And how might you make room at your table? Who is God asking you to honor, to welcome, to feed, especially in the face of fear or difference?

What if we lived like goodness and mercy were actually chasing us down? What if we trusted, just for today, that we are already held, already enough, already home?

So let us be people of the Psalm. People who ask deeper questions. People who trust the shepherd more than the chaos.

Let us be people who rest, resist, and rise, knowing the shepherd walks with us every step of the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.