



WHAT IF WE HAD NO SHEPHERD?

Grace/Caminando con Jesús Lutheran Church

Easter 4 (B)

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Pastor David J Salinas

SERMON TEXT

Psalm 23

✝ IN NOMINE JESU ✝

In one of the all-time classic movies, *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey arrives at a newfound and never-to-be-lost-again appreciation for his life. You remember how it happened? In a moment of despair after losing his business, George attempts suicide on Christmas Eve, thinking the world would be better off without him. Angel 2nd Class, Clarence, George's Guardian Angel, out to earn his wings, gives George a renewed and deeper-than-ever appreciation and love for his life by showing George what life in his hometown of Bedford Falls would have been like without him, as if he had never been born.

On Easter Sunday we began taking a page out of Clarence the Angel's playbook when it came to fulfilling our aim this Easter Season (and really every Easter Season)—to arrive at a newfound and never-to-be-lost again appreciation for Christ Jesus and what it means that he is risen, and the incredible, incomparable blessings that are ours because he is! And so, today we gather here to gain a renewed and deeper-than-ever appreciation and love for the most important life there is—not our own, of course, our dear Savior's life. We come to do this, so that we never take him for granted but cherish him and use every moment of life he gives us to love and serve him and everyone around us to his glory and our great blessing. And so, one last time, we ponder an unspeakably horrible 'What if,' What if there was no Jesus? ***What if...we had no Shepherd?***

So, how about that? What if God never gave us his Son as our Shepherd? Well, then, we'd all be in a state of constant *lack*,

and, therefore, in a state of constant want— constant emptiness, constant hunger of the soul, constant discontent and dissatisfaction. King David assures us of this as he proclaims the opposite truth in this favorite of Psalms, the 23rd Psalm. Under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, King David states it so matter-of-factly—**“The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing.”** Do you see where David is leading us in that phrase “I lack nothing”? He’s inviting us to say to ourselves, *“Really? Can Jesus really mean that much, can he be that big, that complete of a thing to fill every nook and cranny of our heart, of our dreams, our hopes, our aspirations and expectations of God, that if we have him, we have it all, no matter what else we do or don’t have in life? And so, in that phrase David all but tempts us to imagine and call to mind that one thing in your life you want so badly, you feel it is an absolute need—love, understanding, health, a mended relationship, peace of mind. Then, David wants you to imagine that boat never coming in. He’s saying that even if you never get that earthly blessing you most want and pray for, you still lack nothing, because what you have in Jesus is always better and always more than whatever you have or don’t have in life! So, if he is your shepherd, you have it all, no matter what else you do or don’t have in life. If you don’t have Jesus, if he is not your shepherd, then, when at the end of the day, you lack everything, no matter what other earthly blessings you have in life!*

Just consider on the basis of Psalm 23 the inestimable treasures we would lack if we had no Jesus as our Shepherd. We would lack sweet peace and refreshing rest. Quick, name the simpleminded, slow, woolly animal that can’t sleep unless things are just right? No, not husbands on Sunday afternoon during football season! Sheep! As a Christian author noted, most animals know how to rest—dogs doze, bears hibernate, cats invented the catnap. The only animal that can’t get to rest by themselves are sheep. Sheep can’t sleep. Everything has to be

just right for them to do so—no predators, no tension in the flock, no bugs in the air, no hunger in the belly. But sheep can't provide that environment for themselves. They can't do what it takes to provide their own rest. They need a shepherd. The same is true of us. If we had no Shepherd, we would get no rest and end up bone-weary. And I'm not talking now mainly about physical rest, I'm talking about bone-weariness of the soul. So, I once visited a lady who was in such pain, she couldn't get a moment's rest, and she told me, "Pastor, it hurts so much! I'm so sorry for my sins. I wonder what I did for God to be doing this to me." That's bone-weariness of the soul. If we had no Shepherd, that fatigue of the soul would be our only experience in our pain.

If we had no Shepherd, we would lack and be in want of sufficiency. You know the old saying, "If something is worth doing, it's worth doing well." Well, sometimes, you have so many things on your plate that are worth doing that I rather believe it's better said, "If something is worth doing, it's worth doing poorly." In other words, sometimes, you just got to get it done frayed edges, shortcomings, failures, and all. And you know that old saying that supposedly comes from the Bible, "The Lord will never give you more than you can handle." Not true! The Lord very often gives us more than we can handle. He often has us bite off more than we can chew by our strength and ability. That's how he gets us to fall on Him. (Tell you what, the Lord is keeping this pastor humble in that regard). But in all of that comes the gnawing question of sufficiency, "Was it good *enough*? Am I good *enough*? If we had no risen Shepherd, the answer would be a definite and emphatic No! We would have no holy blood to sprinkle on our shortcomings and make them complete and beautiful in the eyes of holy God!

If we had no Shepherd, we would lack courage and be plagued with constant worry and be frozen with fear. We would be like

sheep trying to get to good pasturelands without a shepherd. Those shepherd-less sheep would never even attempt the trip. They would be too skittish and fearful of all the dangers that they instinctively sense lurk around every corner. That would be us. The hymn-writer says it so rightly and so well:

I walk in danger all the way; The thought shall never
leave me That Satan, who has marked his prey, Is plotting
to deceive me. I pass through trials all the way, With sin
and ills contending; In patience I must bear each day the
cross of God's own sending. Oft in adversity I know not
where to flee When storms of woe my soul dismay. Grim
death pursues me all the way; Nowhere I rest securely. He
comes by night, he comes by day, and takes his prey
most surely.

Without Jesus, our Good Shepherd, leading us and being our companion each step of the dark, shadow-filled valleys of life, we would lack the courage to face life, let alone death.

If we had no Shepherd, we simply would lack security and, therefore, life. The image that comes to mind are of African Christians in orange jumpsuits being led to their slaughter at the hands of gun and machete-wielding members of ISIS. If we had no Shepherd that would be every believer in Christ on earth. Satan cannot stand us having even a piece of toast for breakfast. So, without a Shepherd, we would have died of violence, disease, or accident before the waters of baptism hit our heads.

If we had no Shepherd we would lack finally all blessing, all honor, all goodness, and, therefore, we would lack even one moment of joy and gladness, of peace and contentment in life.

This is what things would be like in the "Bedford Falls" that is our life, if that unthinkable horrible what if were the case—***What If We Had No Shepherd?*** And so, with all of the passion,

excitement, and drama of George Bailey fall on your knees in praise of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was and is and ever will be your Shepherd, your good shepherd! Seeing the jaws of God's holy justice bearing down on you and me to devour us for our sins, for our doubts and mistrust of him, our Jesus jumped into the gap in between us and those fierce jaws and he laid down his life for us all. In love for you and me Jesus allowed himself to be devoured by his Father's hungry, ravenous justice until that justice was good and satisfied. Having satisfied that justice, the Good Shepherd with a power and love for you that only he has, he rose from the dead with this single, solitary goal in mind—to get to be your Shepherd! By the waters of baptism and the good news of him, he gave us his Spirit, so that we are his flock, his dearly loved sheep that listen to his voice and that he even carries in his arms close to his chest, like his own child!

You and I are not without a Shepherd! Jesus is our Shepherd! He is! Since he is, what do you and I lack, what are we in want of? *Nothing!* Absolutely nothing! In having Jesus as our shepherd, we have the source of the sweetest most refreshing rest. "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened," says your Shepherd, 'and I will give you rest.' *Sweet, refreshing, rest!*" And in his word and sacraments he leads us to the green pastures he created with his pierced hands. With his pierced hands he tore out the thorny brush of condemnation. He pried loose the boulders of guilt and put around us of promises to always be for us. Here we sit, like sheep nestled deep in long shoots of grass, a still pond on one side, our shepherd in the middle caring for us. He restores my soul. We lack no rest!

With Jesus as our Shepherd we lack no sufficiency! We are enough! The Good Shepherd made us as holy as he is by covering us in himself through our baptismally created faith. So we have a God who, at all times, sees us and says, "My Son!"

"No holy God," we say, "it's just me, sinful, weak, insufficient me." But he puts his hand over our mouth. No, no, the blood of my Son covers you and all you do, everyday, every moment. You are my holy, perfect child! You are *enough!*

With Jesus as our Shepherd, we lack no courage, because we lack no leader, no companion, no protector or caretaker! The hymn-writer had it right and said it well when he said—"I walk in danger all the way," but he had it just as right and said it just as well, when he said, "I walk with Jesus all the way." Psalm 23 makes that point so beautifully. Of all the precious things about this Psalm not to be missed, one of them has to be this: the shift in pronouns. Notice how through v. 3 David has talked to us and God listens. Suddenly, in v. 4 David speaks to God and we listen. It's as if David's face, which was on us, now lifts toward God. **"for you are with me."** David's message is subtle but crucial. As you go through the dark valleys in life, you can rest assured that you don't go it alone! The Good Shepherd is with you every step of the way, all the way. He promised, "Surely, I am with you always to the very end of the age." So, what is there to fear?

With Jesus as our Shepherd, we lack no safety or security; we lack no blessing, or honor, no goodness, no life! Safe within the sheep-pen that also serves as a beautiful banquet hall that is his kingdom—here in church—he puts before us the spread of spiritual and heavenly delights that is him and everything he won for us. He lavishes us with countless blessings day in and day that spill over the lip of the cup. He does it all in the face of the devil and his minions to spite them and to show them and us that we are his dearly loved sheep and he is not willing to let even one of us be snatched and devoured! And everyday of our life Jesus outruns all the arrows of the evil one, and all the hurts and woes of life chasing us down, and he jumps into the gap between them and us and turns them into something good, so

that when all is said and done the only things that actually catch up to us are blessings of his mercy and goodness!

In getting to see what life would have been like without him George Bailey received the great gift of a newfound appreciation for his life and what it meant. In contemplating the unthinkable—**What If We Had No Shepherd?**—I pray that we have all once again received the greatest gift: a newfound appreciation for the life of our Savior, for what it means to have him as our Good Shepherd. I pray that in this rediscovery and renewed appreciation we all dance like happy little sheep and we all say with greater sincerity and joy: The LORD is my shepherd; I lack nothing—nothing! Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

