

## *“The Easiest and Softer Way”*

*Psalm 23; Romans 4:12-25; Mark:31-38*

February 28, 2021

Y'all there was this song I really liked as a teenager. I still hear it from time to time. It's called "The Safety Dance." It's got a catchy beat. Had a really cool video. Whenever I heard it, I liked it but I didn't know much about it other than it was fun. But you know what? A few weeks ago I watched a show where they explained what the song was about. Turns out it's a protest song. Up until that point, the lyrics never made any real sense to me, I just liked the beat. Now, when I hear that song, not only do I enjoy the music, I understand what they're talking about. I kind of like it even more now, now that it feels like I'm inside the story.

I think that points us to a deeper truth. Just because we don't know what a thing means, it doesn't necessarily exclude us from enjoying it on some level. Take for example "Auld Ange Syne." Chances are you sing it every New Year's Eve. The words are somewhat familiar although they're probably garbled a bit by your pronunciation. If you're like me, you get that warm fuzzy feeling we all like so much when you sing it even though you have no earthly idea what you're saying. But the melody doesn't stay with you long. Chances are you won't give the song another thought until the next New Year's Eve rolls around.

What keeps us from really understanding Auld Ange Syne, I wonder? Well, first of all, we're not Scottish. On top of that, none of us were around in the 1700's when it was written. So, they're some real obstacles to us enjoying the song from an insider's perspective.

But we can get there, to some degree, if we wanted. We could study the historical period from which it came. We might try to learn more about the life of its composer and what influenced him. We could even travel to Scotland to steep ourselves in the language and the culture. My guess is having done all that, we'd sing Auld Ange Syne far more often than once a year. On top of that I'd bet it'd offer us greater excitement whenever we heard it.

All that brings us to today's Old Testament lection. Without question, Psalm 23 is the most known and memorized set of verses in the entire Bible. Through the years, these words have given us comfort in times of distress. They speak of the care and protection of a loving God. It's a fixture at funerals, read to comfort the grieving. And it's because of that I recognize that I tread in largely uncharted waters because I want to invite you to hear this song anew.

Just for this morning, let's set the piece to more appropriate music. Instead of reading it from the outside, let's try to find ourselves within it and see the words from that perspective. Let's pull the Psalm away from its routine usage and strive to hear it as it was written.

You see sometimes I'm afraid a piece of Scripture becomes so familiar to us we glide over the words without giving them much thought. In some ways, when we sentimentalize Psalm 23, we get the sizzle without the steak. What we're left with is little more than quickly dissipating emotions, not the lasting comfort it offers to engaged disciples of Christ.

This morning, I want us to probe the depths of this psalm. To do so, I want us to hear it in concert with our reading from Mark where Jesus tells us to deny ourselves and carry the cross. At first glance, the two readings seem to paint remarkably divergent pictures. The psalm talks of comfort and provision. In the other, Jesus points us to suffering and sacrifice.

Yet I'm convinced that the two *must* be heard together. Like the treble and bass clefs of a great symphony, either piece heard apart from the other is sorely lacking.

Psalm 23 opens with the declaration, "The Lord is my shepherd." The tense of the verb is active, present. It isn't in either the past or future tense. The Psalm doesn't say that the Lord was my shepherd when I so desired it or that the Lord will be my shepherd when I'm ready. What it says is that the Lord is now, presently, the one leading me.

And lest we envision just a kindly old man out in a pasture with a crook as we conjure an image, recall that in the Ancient Near East where the Psalm was composed, **KINGS** we're called shepherds. For David to declare the Lord to be his shepherd, he's acknowledging the God as his sovereign leader. The Lord is my King, David writes. He's my ruler.

In the same way, Jesus has a claim on his true disciples. He's our king. And he doesn't rule from afar or treat us harshly. Instead, he loves us dearly. He knows us intimately and calls us by name. In Christ we understand

that Christianity isn't so much a religion as it is a relationship between us and Jesus. And Jesus is our Shepherd. Our leader. Hear the words of Handel's Messiah resonating in your ears with the words from Revelation "king of kings and Lord of lords."

Living that awareness out is a hard thing for us to do, I think. It's easy to hail Christ as king, difficult to act accordingly. We pay lip service to it now and then but much of our lives are spent following different shepherds, hailing other kings. Too often we buy into the deluded belief that we're masters of our own destiny. We act as though by our wills and by our wits we alone are the high ruler of the sovereign nation of ME. We decide how, when and what we're going to do, rarely in dialogue with God seeking to find his path for us.

There's a really good term for that making its way around right now. It's called functional atheism. What it alludes to is that in theory we're Christians, but in function we act differently. It's what you and I do when we offer only passing praise to our Lord, never taking the time to learn his ways or trace his path.

Make no mistake about it – Jesus Christ gives us our marching orders as he says "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me". But we like different words and so we ignore his. The Psalm says "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." Yet so frequently we avoid the narrow path Jesus leads us down and opt to wander down wider roads. While we're on that path, we may hear the words of Psalm 23, but can't really rejoice in their beauty. Living as functional atheists, we consume the words of the Psalm like so much cotton candy. Nice, pleasing, sweet for a moment but not something that'll nourish us for long.

Look again and see! Find yourself inside the psalm and try reading it from that vantage point. The entirety of Psalm 23 is written from the perspective of one who is actively submitting to the Lord, even when it comes with a cost.

I imagine David composes Psalm 23 alone, in a cave bleeding and on the run. The Prophet Samuel has anointed him as King of Israel but the old King, Saul wants him dead. He's been on the run for weeks, at times starving, always fearing for his life. There with just a moment's rest from his struggles, he writes these powerful words of Psalm 23.

These are more than cheap phrases to him. Far more than stock images to be drawn out when he wants a fleeting moment of comfort. These lyrics were written by a man whose decision to follow God's Word has cost him.

And so, I don't think these words can't be fully heard by us when we say we love Jesus but our actions tell otherwise. How can we understand them when we live so comfortably while others struggle? We so frequently turn our backs on the needs of the less fortunate we should wonder – "Are we denying ourselves?" How can we say that we're walking through the darkest valley when we rarely tread outside of our upper middle-class neighborhoods?

I think we hear only one clef of the divine music of Psalm 23 when most of our lives we're silent with the Good News or act as though God's word could be ignored whenever our current cultural environment tells us to do so. Is that the right path he sets us on for his name's sake? I wonder in our silence and tolerance of sin, are we really willing to bear the Cross?

These words of the Psalm point towards an active and willing submission to God's authority. This is the ability to follow and do even though perhaps in the moment none of it makes any sense at all.

He leads me, he makes me, he leads me says the psalmist. Following the tenor of the Psalm, David understood that he'll find himself in darkest valley but only because God's led him there. And he trusts God will lead him through it. David has more than words behind his acknowledgement of his Shepherd's rule, he has ACTIONS. He trusts the shepherd enough to follow his instructions, to go where HE goes.

I think in our society a couple of words have become tainted with deep suspicion and prejudice. Unfortunately, they're words necessary and vital to our lives as Christians. The two words are submission and obedience. Both, to our modern ears, speak of surrendering ourselves in such a way as to be despised by us.

But the fact of the matter is that to hail Jesus as Lord means to follow him in all he asks of us. We don't hail him as King of King and Lords of Lords as though the declaration was merely our "get into heaven free card."

What Jesus tells us to do is deny ourselves and carry his cross. Then we're called to walk behind him through the darkest valley fearing NOTHING. We're to submit ourselves to training his lead, obedient to him to the point of even looking like fools to the rest of this broken world.

True Christian disciples do that. They take his steps. His followers sacrifice themselves for others on His behalf. They give of their time, their energy, their money. They're obedient to God as best they're able. They follow the Jesus way, trusting him.

Folks, to be led by Jesus at times means saying, I may think one thing but in hearing the Lord's commands and directives, in seeing his path by the power of the Holy Spirit, I willingly submit myself to his shepherding even though I'd rather do or think otherwise.

Being a Christian is following. It's submission. It's obedience.

It's the willingness to do and try things that perhaps wouldn't be our natural inclination. Maybe it's inviting a new neighbor over to dinner with the hope of sharing your faith in God. It's signing your name up to cook dinner for the kids on Sunday night or volunteering to help out at Springfest. Perhaps it's stepping forward and saying "there are kids around here who don't eat when school isn't in session. I want to begin a feeding ministry to them."

That's following Jesus.

That's walking directly behind our shepherd and going where he's going no matter where he leads us. And where he's leading us is down a road that moves away from self-centeredness into the dwelling of the Lord's house today and into eternity.

So, I wonder – Is the Lord our shepherd? Are we willing to let go of the things that hold us from him, our distractions, our doubts, our worries, our fears? Are we now able to turn all that stuff over to Him and simply follow behind, like a sheep to a shepherd? Like leaders to their true and rightful King.

Because when we do that, that'll be the day we'll really "get" Psalm 23, not like bubblegum pop music but rather like the majestic and sweeping symphony that it truly is! Only then will we stand inside the music with full understanding and appreciation.

I can't help but share with you something that I heard from a child of a church I was serving years ago. It was a Sunday night around 5:30pm, right about the time the Tarheels were playing in the NCAA tournament. Now I knew this particular child is a HUGE Carolina fan. I've seen him don their apparel, moreover, I've seen both his parents sport the Carolina blue on multiple occasions.

So, I said to him "I can't believe you're here" half-expecting to hear him lament the fact that his parents MADE him come to church over against his obvious desires.

What I heard was the most amazing thing.

You know what he said to me?

He said this "yeah, my Dad offered to come and pick me up and take me home from here right before the game so I could see it. But I told him I wanted to be here, at church instead."

It was the most powerful testimony I've heard all week. Here was a kid willing to deny himself something that's obviously interesting to him to come to a place to learn more about how to follow Jesus.

And I began to wonder what it might have been like for him to hear Psalm 23 in the moment because in the moment I guarantee you something. That kid was following Jesus. His that day was no sentimental Christianity. No mere offering of words without surrender, submission and obedience. My guess is that in that moment, he would've heard the words and truly understood their meaning.

Y'all here was this one time I picked up a guy in Belmont whose car ran out of gas in front of me. As I carried him to the gas station, he told a sad story after he heard I was a pastor. It was right about the time the economy was melting down. He'd run out of gas because he'd been running on fumes, his unemployment money wasn't going to be deposited until the next day. Turns out, his wife was on disability already, she'd gotten hurt in a workplace accident a few years ago. His income kept the family housed and fed and now, it was gone.

It was a hard luck story, to be sure.

After he'd filled up his gas can with a meager \$5 worth of fuel, he got back into my car. I had \$40 in my wallet. I'd pulled it out and tried to hand it to him. He looked at me, kind of shocked really. What he told me I hope will stick with me forever. He said, "naw preacher, you give that to somebody who needs it. We'll be fine. I've got a house, I've got a family, and a great church. "But best of all" he said, I've got Jesus in my heart." That made him confident he'd get through the storm. He then went on to tell me about working down at Crisis Assistance Ministry down in Charlotte. "Send that money there. Those people could use it" he implored.

Thinking back on that, I can't help but hear "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

I'm convinced we must actively follow Jesus to really have the ears to hear this Psalm. We've got to trust him enough to be led by him. Obedient to the point of surrendering to his Word, denying ourselves and picking up the Cross. Here, in our sanctuary comfortably awaiting our lunches we hear Psalm23 like a pop song, vaguely memorable, passing nice. We're intrigued by the beat *but don't really get the lyrics*. But Jesus Christ, in His call to us to follow Him as our King invites us to hear the richness and depth of this Psalm on a whole different level.

Step inside the lyrics of Psalm 23. Deny yourself, pick up the Cross. Understand the words from an insider's perspective and you'll know his comfort and provision, not just for a moment but for all of your life. In fact, you'll know life in its fullest possible sense, this day and into eternity.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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