“The Lord is my Shepherd… I shall not want.” +++ It’s one of the most beloved – simplest – yet most profound statements in the Bible… “The Lord is my Shepherd… I shall not want.” +++ It’s a statement of peace (“beside the still waters, he restores my soul”) – a statement of courage (“I will fear no evil – for thou art with me”) – a statement of blessing (“my cup runneth over”). +++ A while back, a news story caught my attention; maybe you saw it, too. It was a scary story of an elderly woman in New York City. She was the victim of a home invasion, when two masked intruders forced their way into her apartment and knocked her to the ground. She saw them pistol-whip her great-grandson,… grab a few things,… then disappear into the night. I looked up as the reporter asked her if she had been terrified, and I was surprised to see a slight smile on her face – a glow – as she responded, “Yea though I walk through the valley… I’m OK. I’ve got God.” And that was the end of the story. But, you know, really, maybe that said everything that needed to be said… “I’m OK… I’ve got God.”

The image of God as our loving shepherd is a common Old Testament theme. Here are a few examples: Psalm 95 – “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand;” Psalm 100 – “We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture;” Isaiah tells us, “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep;” and in Ezekiel, “For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.”

The 23rd Psalm, though, is the best known. It is so immediate and personal – “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” It tells us what it feels like to live in God’s grace everyday. Our loving God watches over us – reliably – extravagantly.

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus has just declared to his disciples that he is the Good Shepherd – who lays down his life for his sheep. It comes in a section of John when a lot of people have been struggling to understand who Jesus really is and what he’s up to. In the previous chapter, he had healed a blind man. That’s a pretty incredible thing – to be able to see when you’ve been blind your whole life, but when the Pharisees asked him what happened, the man really doesn’t know. He can only say that the man called Jesus “put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” He had no idea where Jesus had gone next and did not even seem to wonder where Jesus’ healing power came from. Except for Jesus’ growing number of followers, people were either unable or unwilling to consider that Jesus might really be the Son of God.

But now, a group of skeptical Jews gather around him to settle things once and for all. They are trying to get him to say something they can hold against him. “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Jesus does not back down. He answers :: “I have told you, and you do not believe me. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep… My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” +++ At the end of the passage, when Jesus finishes speaking, the Jews pick up rocks to stone him for blasphemy, shouting, “You, though only a human being, are making yourself God.” +++ He has answered their question plainly and truthfully:: – He is the Good Shepherd – but they reject his answer.

I’d like to ask three questions of my own with you this morning, and see if we can find some answers to them together. 1) If everyone else was so confused about Jesus, how do WE know that he is our Good Shepherd? 2) What happens if we wander from the flock? 3) What does the message about the Good Shepherd mean for us TODAY?

1 How do we know that Jesus is our Good Shepherd?
To get our hands around that question, let me start with an easier one: How does a child know who her parents are? It’s not because we just tell them, is it? – No, we show them, everyday and in many ways – year after year after year. +++ When our daughter Emily was in college, Linda and I went down to visit one weekend. As usual when visiting children in college, we took her to the grocery store to restock her refrigerator and shelves. +++ Looking over the large selection of apples, we asked which she kind prefers. Now, remember that college students are very thrifty because they are usually low on funds. Em said, “Well, I really love the Pink Ladies, but just get the Red Delicious because they are cheaper.” +++ She thought it’s not worth it to buy the apples she likes – the ones that make her happy. Other things are more important. +++ But, I said, “TODAY you are here with your parents. – Today… you get Pink Ladies.” +++ I realized later that getting the kind of apples that make her happy was much more important to us than it was to her. She was ready to settle for less – thought she deserved less – but to us, she deserves everything. +++ Then on the way home, for good measure, we made a surprise stop for her favorite milkshakes…. +++ +++ Children know who their parents are through experience, not some rational test. Who loves them above everything else in the world? Who protects them? Who buys them Pink Ladies just to see them smile?

This is also how the sheep of Jesus’ flock know that HE is the Good Shepherd. They – we – experience his compelling love and grace firsthand everyday. Christ lavishes us with luxuries that we can’t buy for ourselves: the peace of green pastures and still waters, he restores our souls, leads us on the right paths, protects us from evil and comforts us. +++ He gives us eternal life. +++ Through his grace we hear his voice and know it. +++ And we follow him.

Christ is not someone we can understand. But, we know that he loves us. +++ We know that he saves us. +++ We know that he is our Good Shepherd.

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2. Our second question is: With does our shepherd do if we wander from the flock?

After all, it is in a sheep’s nature to wander away from its keeper. They get curious or distracted and wander away from the shepherd. And, that’s when they can start getting themselves into trouble… As part of Christ’s flock it’s also in our nature to wander away from him. +++ Jesus thinks so much of you that he lavishes you with grace, never asking you to earn it. +++ But yet we can be plagued by self-doubt, thinking we don’t deserve God’s love. +++ Do you sometimes wonder if you are good enough for God’s love? +++Are you able to forgive yourself as quickly as you forgive other people? +++ Do you waste time regretting the past? +++ Or, fearing the future? +++ Doubt creeps in… It keeps you awake at night – anxiousness overtakes your peace of mind.

Or, maybe you begin to settle for the things you can provide yourself: the job, the house, money in the bank… As though that’s all you really have – and all you really need. +++ Do you sometimes forget the source of your real blessings: love, tenderness, generosity, … the air you breathe… green pastures… still waters… ??? +++ If you forget to treasure these blessings, you’ll find no comfort when you do fail, because you’ll think you have to sink or swim – all on your own. +++ And you don’t.

Or, perhaps you’ve become a perfectionist in everything you do. Nothing is good enough until your time and talents have made it so. +++ You have to solve every problem,… be all things to all people. +++ You cannot show any weakness. +++ No vulnerability. +++ You just can’t afford to rely on grace because, well, things are just too important to take that risk.

Those are a few of the ways we wander. Maybe you wander in other ways. +++ When we wander, we separate ourselves from the blessings of the Good Shepherd. –+++ When you… wander… you let your doubts,… your fears,… and your ambitions keep you from simply… accepting… that YOU… are God’s beloved,… they keep you from opening your arms… and your heart,… and just basking … in his grace.
But, this is not the end of the story. The Good News is Jesus assures us we will not be lost from his flock, no matter where we roam. “No one will snatch them from my hand,” he says. The shepherd pursues his sheep wherever they wander – he protects them from wolves… lifts them up… and gently carries them home.

The Psalm assures us that goodness and mercy will follow us all the day of our lives. But, it’s actually a stronger message than that. The Hebrew verb radaf, translated as “follow,” more often means “to pursue” or “to chase.” So, when we wander – wherever we go, …whatever we might do – the goodness and mercy of God will pursue us – our shepherd will catch up with us – will not leave us alone to forget where we belong.

As Paul wrote to the church in Rome, “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,…will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

3  Finally, what does the message about the Good Shepherd mean for us TODAY?

It means that God is with us no matter what is happening around us – no matter what we do. The Psalm gives us the confidence to look for the hand of God blessing us, even in the most threatening circumstances – the “valley of the shadow death.” It calls us to live into grace actively – it’s not a passive thing. The Psalm calls us to live courageously. To proclaim, whatever happens in our lives, that Christ is already providing for our true eternal safety. +++ Like the great-grandmother who praised God after her violent encounter.

We end our services every week with a benediction – often repeating Paul’s blessing – “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” This does not just send us off with good wishes. It reminds us of something that is ALREADY true – The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ IS with you all the time. God DOES love you. The Holy Spirit IS in communion with you – touching your heart – holding you – walking with you.

Christ is not asking you to weigh the evidence and choose him. That’s for those who ask for proof. But YOU – you are already in his flock. YOU are beloved by him. When YOU wander away he pursues YOU … and carries YOU home.

Listen for his call – when you are driving, when you are at work or school, when you brush your teeth, watch the news, or listen to politicians vying to for your trust and loyalty. Listen for your shepherd’s voice that’s embedded in, and flows through, ALL of that. – You will recognize his voice, because you know him. +++ Follow his voice back to the green pastures of his love, the still waters of his grace – and be comforted, knowing that goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life – and you are his… forever.

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