

“God is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Just hearing these well-loved words brings for many of us an immediate sense of calm, of exhale, dropping our shoulders, comfort, and peace. God is my shepherd. So often we hear this classic psalm read to bring comfort to those who are grieving, who are in the midst of accepting a beloved person’s death, who are in the very depths, that very valley of shadows and death mentioned in the psalm itself. And yet it’s not the valley of the shadow of death that we remember from this psalm - it’s the lush green pastures, the still waters, it’s God’s comforting shepherd’s rod and staff, it’s anointing my head with oil and making a table in the presence of my enemies, it’s God’s goodness and mercy that will follow me all the days of my life.

God’s goodness and mercy are the root of Jesus being our Good Shepherd, as he teaches us in our Gospel reading today. Being the Good Shepherd means such a deep commitment to leading us in the way of God’s love and mercy and goodness that He laid down His own life for our sake. This is sacrificial leadership, different from the hired hand who is in this for the money and the role and not for the sake of the sheep. Jesus is here for the sake of us, His beloved sheep, God’s good creation promised to be the recipients of goodness and mercy all the days of our lives, even in the presence of enemies and the shadow of death itself.

Following God means a life of goodness and mercy every single day. Following God is a call to live out the promises of our baptism. Following God means letting God lead us, and God leads us to the lush pastures of creation, the still waters of life-nourishing water, the anointing oil of being chosen, the comfort of being led by the one who will never abandon or forsake us. But our day to day life does not always look like lush green pastures or still waters, or goodness or mercy from God. Our lives can look a lot more like the valley of the shadow of death these days, or at least, they look like a fraught and frantic place where some holy type of goodness and mercy are desperately needed to restore our souls.

So friends, think with me for a moment, what gets in the way of you being led by God? What stops you from being led by God?

I think we all have things that get in the way of truly listening for God in our lives from time to time. We're human, we're not perfect, it happens. Oftentimes for me it's my anxiety about what the future may or may not hold that gets in the way of trusting what the Spirit tells me is right and true in my gut. Sometimes it's fear about money, about purpose or role, about our various callings in life. Sometimes we identify with that hired hand who feels the need to run for his own sake, at the expense of the sheep's well-being. Sometimes it's easier to follow a false god created by this world instead of the God who created us in the beginning. Sometimes we fear the truth of what happens to our fellow humans and have to confront our own biases that get in the way of truly loving our neighbors and our enemies. Sometimes we are simply led astray by the many forces we encounter in our day to day lives, and it takes some effort and intention to get back to the way of listening and being led by God.

Now, let's be clear. Following God is not always guaranteed to be easy. The disciples who followed Jesus were very much aware of this and yet still thought it was worth it enough to leave behind everything they knew in order to be led by Jesus, the Messiah, God with us. We too often have to leave behind some preconceived notions, some sorts of comfort or familiarity in order to follow what is truly God's calling, rather than simply a confirmation of what we think is right in the world. We too have to trust that in the grand scheme we are much more like one little lamb in the beloved flock than the Good Shepherd himself. (Thank God for that - it's a huge responsibility!).

Though following God is not always guaranteed to be easy, it is certainly worth the cost of being a disciple, a follower of Jesus, of allowing ourselves to be led by the one who created us in love. Our God's love is so endless that not even death could separate us from His promises of love and new life.

No one, no single person, is ever the exception to God's love. No one is the exception to being led by a God of goodness and mercy, of new life and creation itself. No one is the exception to being delivered from the forces of

sin and death that defy God and cast out the one in favor of the 99. No one is the exception to Jesus our Good Shepherd and Savior of our lives. You are not the exception to being loved. You are not the exception in being led to new life, of recovering, of healing, of moving out of your own valley and shadows of death. You are loved. You are worthy of God's love. You are worthy of being a new creation, dear one. God's love is bigger than any enemy or shadow of death, God is here, loving you, leading you, living within you in the Holy Spirit. Your soul can be restored. You can exhale. You can find a moment of green pasture peace and still water soul restoration in the embrace of Jesus our very Good Shepherd.

And friends, it's not just each of us individually. Every single lamb in this flock of humanity is just as deserving of God's goodness and mercy as we ourselves are. Every single lamb that goes astray, God will leave the 99 behind to bring that one little lamb back into the fold. Every single lamb that God has created and called good is in need of nurturing, of care, of life abundant and the goodness and mercy of God. Every single lamb is worthy of comfort, of life, of being held in the arms of the good shepherd who guides us from the valley of shadows into the hope of new life. Every single lamb is also worthy of our own love and care, made possible by the God who first loved us, in the life and death of Jesus Christ, and by the life-saving power of the Holy Spirit.

It is only through Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who knows and leads us all, that we are able to be one flock. Jesus is the Good Shepherd worth following because Jesus gives of himself for our sake. Not for the sake of recognition or the good pay or security, but for the sake of the broken, beautiful humanity of which we are a part. This flock of beloved humanity, whom we are called to love in truth and action, not just word and speech, is how Christ's body is alive here with us on earth. We follow Christ our Good Shepherd by loving our fellow people in truth and action.

So friends, when the time comes that you are led astray and need to let God guide you, shepherd you in life, think about how you can love your fellow people in truth and action. Think of the ways that you find green

pastures and still waters in your life, literally or figuratively.

Think of how you can not only restore your own soul, but how your actions can help to restore your fellow people. This is how God's goodness and mercy show up, in the ways we serve one another. God's goodness and mercy comfort us and lead us throughout our lives, and it's up to us to be led into truth and action by the one who restores and shepherds us in love, each and every day. Thanks be to God, Amen.