

OUR SHEPHERD IS ALWAYS WITH US

Sermon for the Closing of St John's Lutheran Congregation, Minden

Psalms 23

¹ The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

³ He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Dear friends in Christ,

The catchcry of the authors of the Lutheran Confessions was 1 Peter 1:25, "*the Word of the Lord remains for ever.*" Peter was quoting Isaiah's famous words from chapter 40:6-8, the beginning of the comforting and gospel-filled second half of his great book. It is the mighty, living, eternal Word of God that alone can bring eternal life to the people of our dying planet. The Word that Isaiah spoke about was the very same Word that had brought countless people to faith before him. Peter repeated those words which had brought those of his time to faith, and this same Word has been preached from this pulpit over the years, bringing that same life-giving Word to people of our generation.

So it is that we take great joy in the ministry of this congregation. I do not know the complete history of St John's, but I know that there have been many baptisms, Sunday school classes, confirmations, weddings and funerals.

Congregations have a lifecycle. Some live longer, and some live shorter. Congregations change, but "*the Word of the Lord remains for ever.*"

Still, it is a sad day. No member likes to see his congregation close. Yes, we shall still be able to use these facilities whenever the need arises, but St John's congregation will cease to exist. But do not despair. Remember, congregations with their man-made constitutions and so on don't last forever. Like King Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 3:1, "*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.*"

Don't be sad. Remember the words of Jeremiah, "*I shall turn their mourning into joy. I shall comfort them and give them joy instead of their sorrow*" (31:13). How the LORD yearns and loves His people! He is your Father, and as such, will never ever abandon you! To do so would go against His whole being. Again, speaking through Jeremiah, He says, "*I have loved you with an everlasting love. That is why I have been stretching My mercy full length*" (31:3). What a marvellous picture of God's grace that is rooted in the hidden depths of His unfathomable love. That love springs deep from within His inner being. Out of all that He has created, He has chosen you to be His children for no other reason than the love He has for you!

So today, I want to remind you that although we close the congregation of St John's, yet that everlasting love of God will still be with you. God is not taking His Word away from you. No, He is still going to show that everlasting love by continuing to serve you in Word and Sacrament. And don't we need that today! Think of this year, for example. As we fast approach the end of 2021, look at what we have had to deal with. There has been the ongoing battle with covid 19, bad government decisions and the uprising of dangerous nations. I feel for the poor farmers who had been looking forward to harvesting bumper crops, now with all the rain, a lot of that crop has been wrecked. On a personal level, some have had to deal with family issues, health issues, and other unpleasantness. Whatever we have had to or are still dealing with, they aren't going to end magically. Whatever is still heavy on our hearts today is probably going to be heavy on our hearts tomorrow.

So that's why, today, even though we are closing a congregation, we still thank God because He has guided us throughout the years gone by, and He will continue to do so in the years to come. Our Good Shepherd will always be with us.

We are all familiar with Psalm 23. It's perhaps the most well-known of the Psalms. The Holy Spirit had inspired King David to write this Psalm. David knew about sheep and shepherding. He grew up tending the flocks in the fields. He almost missed out on his anointing as the next King of Israel because he was tending to the sheep while everyone else had gathered for the celebration.

And David knew something about being a king, being the most successful and faithful King in Israel's history - though certainly not without his flaws. But he knew well that the leadership that a king or other ruler must present for his people is very similar to the care of the sheep. The nation needed a strong leader willing and able to do what needed to be done, to make difficult decisions, to sacrifice self for the good of the whole. This was King David in a nutshell.

But David also has the clear vision to recognise that he was not the be-all, end-all of leadership, governing, or even shepherding. He didn't execute his responsibilities flawlessly, and in fact, his sin got him into danger more than once. He recognised that without God, he was nothing. Without God's forgiveness, he would be lost forever. Without God at his side every moment of every day, he would have had no success either in the field or on the throne. He saw very clearly that God was the perfect King, the perfect Shepherd.

But the truths that David expounds on in Psalm 23 are not just for him or other shepherds around 1000 BC; neither are they just for kings and other leaders. The things that David points to God doing as his Shepherd apply to you and me just as much as they did to King David. As we continue our journey through life, let us see the promises of our God as He shepherds us into the future, just as He has shepherded us in the past.

David writes, "**¹The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ²He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.**" Sheep are not great at finding food or water. The shepherd needs to be diligent about leading the flock not only to where they can eat and drink but also where they can eat and drink safely. And so, the shepherd leads the sheep to the ideal spots where they can have their needs met while doing so without threat from predators or other dangers.

God does the same for us. Left on our own, we would flail about all over the place, looking for ways to meet our needs. If we've ever felt lost or separated from our God, if we've ever tried to figure out everything on our own, we know how discouraging and upsetting that is. But our Good Shepherd promises to provide daily bread - He will continue to give us what we need. And you've seen that in action. Look back over the past years. Despite all the concerns or worries of life, surely you realise that you have always had what you needed. When we pray the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "*Give us this day our daily bread*", we are simply acknowledging all the good gifts He gives.

But God's guidance doesn't end at providing for our physical needs.

David continues: "**³He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. ⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**"

Our Shepherd is not only concerned about us physically, but all the more spiritually. He restores our soul. The broken heart, the screaming conscience, He comes to heal. Every time when we gather together for worship, we hear the same message, the chief work of our Good Shepherd - how He has come to lay down His life only to take it up again.¹ He comes to us through His means: Word and Sacrament, granting to us the forgiveness of sins that has been won for us by His death and proved by His resurrection.

Because of Jesus' forgiveness, we are led by our Shepherd "**in the paths of righteousness,**" walking in the way that shows and proves the right relationship with God that He has given to us. Sins are forgiven, so we need not walk the path of sin and death anymore. We don't have to walk those dark and dreary streets that lead to eternal death because sin is not our master. Our Shepherd leads us, and we belong to Him. We know His voice, and because of Him, we can walk about living our lives, thanking and glorifying Him. We can gather wherever He wills to give Him thanks. Even if the only place we had was under a tree somewhere, He would still teach us that even though we all must "**walk through the valley of the shadow of death,**" how we must live with evil, we need not fear, for our Shepherd is with us. He is there to comfort with His rod and staff.

¹ John 10:18

A shepherd's staff has several uses. He may use that staff to fight off an enemy to protect the sheep. Or he may use the hook at the end of it to drag the sheep by the neck to get the animal out of danger. That likely is against the sheep's will. It's not pleasant for a sheep to have the staff hooked around the neck and be dragged, but the shepherd knows that temporary discomfort likely will mean the difference between life and death.

God's staff comforts in the same way. He might fend off our enemies that threaten us, or He may drag us away from the sin that threatens us in a way that is not so pleasant and not so comfortable. Our Shepherd is not interested in us living the way we want to live; He wants us to live in the way that is best for us and best for us eternally. So even though some sin may seem fun or harmless or whatever, our Shepherd is going to drag us away from that lest it drags us to hell and separates us from Him forever. That's why we find ourselves in church, and sometimes it may feel uncomfortable. No one likes being grabbed by the rod of God's Law, but we need to hear it.

But that's not to say that God has a desire for us to be miserable forever in this life with a constant pounding of His Law. In fact, it is often just the opposite. David writes, "**⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.**"

Notice the table is prepared, but enemies are still there. God's blessings persist even in difficult times. There is no doubt the wolves are surrounding the Church. I am sure that every time a church closes or a congregation flutters away to nothing, the devil smiles with glee. And hasn't there been lots of churches closed and come up for sale! Again, most congregations are just a shadow of what they once were. I am sure you can all remember churches being full to overflowing. In fact, bigger churches have had to be built in years gone by to accommodate a growing membership.

Today, as we find ourselves dissolving this congregation, do not let the devil or any other enemy of your faith get the better of you. Rather, remember with joy all those past years where the Lord has anointed your heads with oil, giving you an abundance of His grace and favour, so much so that your cup has run over. This will not end once we leave here today. The Good Shepherd will always provide you with overflowing spiritual blessings because your Shepherd loves you. Remember, your salvation does not depend on which congregation you belong to or once belonged to, but whether or not you have faith. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, "*Faith is the confident assurance of the things we hope for, the conviction about things that are not seen*" (11:1). Faith is nothing more than simple trust in the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. A congregation is simply a group of people sharing the same faith – the same belief about the Saviour. So it is that again, the writer of Hebrews says, "*Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as some are regularly doing, but let us continue to encourage one another, and so much more as you see the day approaching!*" God requires Christians to gather to hear His Word preached, receive the Sacraments, pray, sing, and give thanks. We can do this together anywhere!

Dear friends, it may not always feel like the Good Shepherd is doing all of these things for us or that they'll turn out the way He promises they will, but we can have the confidence that God will be faithful. God will keep every promise to us. As we look back on the years spent here in this building as a congregation, we must see the good that God has worked in it. The Good News, both Law and Gospel, has been proclaimed from this pulpit. For many years, we have been able to gather uninterrupted with our fellow Christians for worship. That isn't going to change. We still shall gather together, cherishing the time we have to learn more about the love our Good Shepherd has for us. As we do so, "**⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**"

The end result of all of God's shepherding is clear - we shall "**dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**" When He calls us from this life, we shall be in heaven, having eternal perfect life with our God forever because of our Shepherd's work. He has laid down His life for us and taken it up again to provide the payment needed to satisfy the debt of our sins. He shepherds us through our lives, our walk of faith, to keep us close to Him, clinging to Him for the assurance of forgiveness. The life that is coming will be free from all sin and sorrow and hardship. No matter what the past may have done or what the future may yet do, we continue to go forward confident of our Saviour's love with the absolute assurance that when it's all over, we shall be with Him forever. "*As God has*

said: "I shall live and walk among them and be their God, and they will be My people" (2 Cor. 6:16).² Our God will continue to serve us in Word and Sacrament. Thanks be to our Shepherd forever and ever! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Lord God, we praise You that You reckon us as blameless in Your sight because of Jesus' obedience for us. We praise You for Your commandments, so that we may love with right knowledge, and for the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask You to bless all who preach, teach, read, and study Your Word, that more and more people may know the Gospel message of joy and hope.

Refine our hearts, so that we may prepare a smooth way for the Lord in them. Give us stronger faith, joy and confidence, and grant that we may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. Enable us to trust You firmly, to worship You with pure hearts, to serve You with clean hands, to obey You with willing minds, and to love You with our whole beings.

Guard us, that Satan, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us, or lead us into error, unbelief, and sin. Do not let us lose the inheritance that You have graciously promised to those who know You in faith. Teach us to watch and pray at all times. We praise You that You have enabled us to stand with joy and confidence before the Son of Man when He comes in glory to judge the living and the dead. Therefore send us Your Spirit so that we strive to be blameless in our love for each other, to grow in it, and to practise it with sensitivity and insight.

Rid Your church of that all that is divisive, evil, and wrong, that all who profess Your name may serve You in truth, purity, and loyal devotion.

Give peace and stability to the nations on earth. Put down all evil rulers, and raise up leaders who will rule and serve us according to Your good pleasure.

May Jesus rule in the hearts of all parents and children. Supply the spiritual needs of all families, so that truth, love, and high morals may bless our homes.

Be with all people everywhere, in all situations and circumstances of life. Give healing to the sick, comfort to the sorrowing, guidance to the young, hope to the aged, comfort to the bereaved, and wisdom to the perplexed.

Dear Father in heaven, we thank and praise You for the many years of service You have granted to the members of St John's Lutheran Church. While we are saddened that we can no longer function as a congregation, nevertheless, You have not taken Your mercy from us. As we move our membership to a sister congregation, may Your blessing follow us. Let Your Word continue to have free reign among us as You continue to serve us with Word and Sacrament ministry. Let us always be thankful that You have called us into Your kingdom, and give us the grace to accept Your will with humble thanks for all You have provided. Keep us in the faith, until that glorious day come when our faith turns to sight.

Lead us to continue to look to Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. Help us to wait in joyful hope for His second Coming, when He will receive us, and all others who believe in Him, into Your eternal presence. This we pray in His holy name. Amen.

The Second Sunday in Advent

Malachi 3:1-7b

¹ **"Look! I am sending My messenger**, and he will **make the way clear ahead of Me**. Then the Lord, for whom you are looking, will suddenly come to His Temple, yes, the Messenger of the covenant, whom you desire. Look! He is coming," the LORD of hosts has said.

² However, **who will endure** the day of His coming? **Who can stand** on the day when He appears? For He will be like a refiner's fire and like launderers'

soap. ³ He will sit down like a refiner and a purifier of silver, purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. Then they will present an offering to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of long ago, as in former years.

⁵ "Then I shall come near to you to judge you. I shall be quick to testify against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear to a lie, against those who defraud hired men of their wages, against

² Cf Exodus 19:4-5; 33:13-19

those who exploit widows and orphans, against those who take away the rights of resident-foreigners and do not fear Me," the LORD of hosts has said. ⁶ "For I, the LORD, have not changed. That is why you, O children of Jacob, have not come to an end. ⁷ Since the times of your fathers you have been turning away from My Prescriptions and have not been keeping them. Return to Me, and I shall return to you!" the LORD of hosts has said.

Philippians 1:2-11

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ I thank my God every time I remember you.

⁴ Every time I pray for all of you I always make my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the Good News from the first day until now. ⁶ I am sure of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷ It is right for me to think like this about all of you, because, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the Good News, I have you in my heart, as people who are all partners in God's grace with me. ⁸ For God is my witness how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ I also pray that your love will overflow still more and more in knowledge and in all insight, ¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are best, that you may be pure and without blame until the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Luke 3:1-20

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, while Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea, while Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee, while his brother Philip was the tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis and while Lysanias was the tetrarch of Abilene, ² and at the time when Annas and Caiaphas were the Chief Priests, the Word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan and preached that people should repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ It was as Scripture has said in the book of the Words of the prophet Isaiah: **"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord! Make His paths straight!'** ⁵ **Every ravine will be filled in.**

Every mountain and hill will be levelled. The crooked roads will be made straight, and the rough roads smooth, ⁶ and all people will see the salvation of God."

⁷ Therefore, John kept saying to the crowds who were coming out to be baptised by him, "You brood of poisonous snakes, who has warned you to run away from the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore, produce fruits worthy of repentance! Do not begin to tell yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'! For I tell you that God can raise children for Abraham from these stones. ⁹ The axe has already been laid at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ The crowds used to ask him, "Therefore, what are we to do?"

¹¹ He used to answer them, "The person who has two tunics should share with the person who has none, and the person who has food should do the same!"

¹² Tax-collectors also came to be baptised and asked him, "Teacher, what are we to do?"

¹³ He told them, "Stop collecting any more money than what has been laid down for you!"

¹⁴ Soldiers also used to ask him, "What are we also to do?"

He told them, "Do not extort money by violence, do not accuse people falsely and be satisfied with your wages!"

¹⁵ The people were expecting something and were all wondering in their hearts whether John might perhaps be the Christ. ¹⁶ John answered them all: "I am baptising you with water. However, the One who is more powerful than I am is coming. I am not worthy to untie His sandal-strap. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ He has His winnowing fork in His hand to clean up His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn but will burn the chaff with fire that cannot be put out."

¹⁸ So, with many other words John kept exhorting the people and telling them the Good News.

¹⁹ However, when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, ²⁰ Herod added this to them all: he locked John up in prison.