

Welcome / Announcements / Land Acknowledgement

As we gather for worship in Jesus' name, we remember that we do so on the traditional and unceded territory of the ləkʷəŋən and the W̱SÁNEĆ. We acknowledge their stewardship of this land throughout the ages. As we pray, reflect, and celebrate in this place, we do so as guests lamenting injustice and asking God to lead us along paths of reconciliation – inspiring new relationships of respect and solidarity.

➤ *He is Lord (repeat)*

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Call to Worship

God, our Shepherd, offers us abundant life.

**Holy God, you are with us!**

God, our Shepherd, leads us by still waters.

**Divine Creator, restore our souls!**

God, our Shepherd, walks with us through every dark valley.

**Yahweh, we will not be afraid!**

**O God, our Shepherd, we praise you for your goodness and mercy with us every day.**

➤ *The Lord's my shepherd*

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† Gathering Prayer / Words of Hope

God of love, we come trusting that your love has the power to defeat evil in the world. Jesus shows us that your love defeats even the power of death. You are with us through the darkest valleys so that we are not afraid. We worship you with glad hearts, praising you in Jesus' name, praying with the breath of your Spirit in us. Renew our strength and courage to face whatever each day holds, so our lives will bring you honour and glory.

God of love, we confess that too often we let the events around us shatter our trust in your love. When terror strikes and innocents fall, we wonder if love can defeat violence. When truth gets lost among misleading claims, we wonder if love can prevail over lies. Forgive us, O God, when we lose our trust in the power of your love and bring us peace. Amen

What will separate us from the love of Christ? Nothing! So let us rejoice that, no matter what is happening around us, God's gracious and forgiving love will never let us go.

➤ *Don't be afraid (remain seated and repeat)*

† Prayer for Understanding

**God of green pastures and still waters, quiet our hearts and minds as we listen to the Scriptures. By your Spirit, deepen our understanding so that we come to know you more fully, and follow your Word more faithfully. Amen**

Scripture    **Acts 2: 42-47**    [NT 120]

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

**1 Peter 2: 19-25**    [NT 233]

For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

**John 10: 1-10**    [NT 103]

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again, Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

### Message

*God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows; you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction. Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk by my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure. You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head, my cup brims with blessing. Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.*

That is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm according to Eugene Peterson in his interpretation of scripture, *The Message*. Sometimes it is good to hear what is familiar in a fresh way – in a way that connects a bit better with our experience. Maybe that is helpful for us as we encounter the shepherd image included in our texts for today: in Psalm 23 – which we sang earlier in our service – in First Peter to describe the relationship we are to have with Christ – and in chapter ten of John's gospel as one of the metaphors Jesus employs to help his followers understand who he is.

For me and for many of you this image may not seem that relevant. Aside from the understanding that shepherds are people who take care of sheep, we likely have little idea what's involved with shepherding, sheepfold or sheep. The picture that comes to our minds likely doesn't have a whole lot to do with what Jesus is talking about here.

We can become distracted by this metaphor into thinking of ourselves as sheep – that perhaps followers of Jesus are intended to be like sheep. If Jesus is portrayed as a good shepherd, then by extension am I depicted as a sheep? Sheep aren't exactly clever, are they? I've heard it said that God created sheep to make chickens look smart – perhaps, perhaps not – the point is that I don't want to be described as a sheep! Does God want

us to be sheep? Are we to aspire to complacency – to flock mentality? Are we to embrace docility and defenselessness?

We need to remember that the image is pointing to Jesus – not to you and me. These representations of the *Lord as Shepherd*, of *Jesus the Good Shepherd* are not so much about the sheep as they are about the shepherd. These images are to reveal the nature of God – the attentiveness of our Lord – the sacrifice of Jesus.

The metaphor of the divine shepherd appears in many Old Testament references, which should not surprise us because the ancient Israelites, to whom the Old Testament authors looked for their definitive traditions, were primarily a pastoral people with their chief wealth represented by their flocks. During their early history, they depended on flocks of sheep for most aspects of their livelihood: food, clothing, a medium of exchange and the central offering of ritual sacrifice. Even today in the many parts of the world one often sees shepherds with their flocks large or small on roads or hillsides very near urban centers.

To follow the metaphor, we must think of a sheepfold. Imagine a rolling plain, dotted with humps and hillocks. Dusk descends, and the shepherd leads his flock into the sheepfold. One of the hillocks has been hollowed out, and the sheep huddle inside next to the sheep of several other shepherds who share this particular fold. Every village has a common sheepfold where flocks find shelter at night, especially in winter. A pair of piled rock walls extend out a few feet from the sides of the hill. If you saw someone climbing over the walls of a sheepfold, you could be reasonably sure of one thing – it is probably not the shepherd but a thief. There is only one legitimate point of entry – the doorway or the gate. The shepherd lies down in the space between the low walls, effectively sealing the enclosure – keeping wild animals from getting in or restless sheep from getting out. Thieves and bandits and wolves will have a difficult time entering with the shepherds on guard. The sheep are safe in the sheepfold.

In the details of the passage from the Gospel of John we find an understanding of the life of humble shepherds in Jesus' day. There was an intimate, personal and affectionate relationship between shepherd and flock. Sheep were precious creatures. A flock of 100 was extra-large. Many flocks numbered no more than 10 to 20. The sheep knew their shepherd's voice and followed willingly. The shepherd knew each by name. Day and night the shepherd lived with them. The shepherd was always there for them – prepared to risk life and limb to save any of them.

Shepherds had a hard life, since they faced all of the hardships of the hostile landscape through which they herded their sheep. Being with the flock, they faced all of the dangers and difficulties that the flock faced, and they were just as vulnerable – to heat in the day – to cold at night – to human and animal predators at all times. They slept with their flocks on nights when there were few enough predators for them to sleep at all – they were seen as poor prospects as husbands and fathers, since they had to leave their own families alone and vulnerable at night.

In the morning each shepherd stood at the gate and called his own sheep from the communal flock. Responding only to their own shepherd's peculiar call, the sheep filed out to be led away to feed wherever pasture could be found. The sheep can't spend their whole lives in the sheepfold, no matter how safe the enclosure may be. There's no food in the fold, after all. Often it was necessary to lead the flocks far into the hills to forage for grass. The sheep may be comfortable and safe, but they must follow the shepherd out of the fold in order to find sustenance – in order to live.

Jesus uses two images to describe himself here: *"I am the good shepherd"* and *"I am the gate for the sheep."* Jesus is both the gate and the shepherd – the one who protects – guards and limits – as well as the one who leads us out to green pasture – to abundant life. We cannot import into our sheepfolds the abundant life that Christ offers us because the very fullness of that life cannot fit inside a safe, comfortable enclosure. Jesus brings us out of the sheepfold so that our lives can expand – so that we may embrace God's unrestrained abundance.

Just as there is more emphasis on the shepherd than on the sheep in John's words – there is more emphasis on going out than coming in. The fold is not the natural domain of the sheep – the world is.

Jesus journeys with the most vulnerable and takes on all their vulnerability. He knows what it's like to be out in the cold. He knows what he's saying when he calls people to leave their homes and villages – even their families – he had done the same himself. He knows what it's like to have people think that you're crazy or irresponsible because of what you leave behind and let go of, because people said the same things about him. That's the kind of life Jesus lives for and with us. This crazy life he lived, and calls us to live, is abundant life – *the* abundant life God promises.

If we are the flock of Christ, then we are led by Jesus to abundant life in the meadow of the world. Yes, there are places and times of risk in that world, but we are led by Christ who lays down his life to protect us. Out in the sunshine and rain – on smooth roads or rough – toiling or resting – climbing or descending – the shepherd has green pastures to show us. We will never find those pastures if we hide away in exclusive flocks and huddle in folds where we are never challenged.

There may be times to come into a sheepfold with high stone walls – times to gather for warmth and support – but most of the time we need to follow the good shepherd into the lush pasture of the world despite the risks we may encounter.

Jesus as a good shepherd is an excellent metaphor. Jesus as the gate – when you understand that being a gate in this context means protecting and limiting those for whom you care – this too is a fine figure of speech. But sheep that take risks? Who ever heard of that?

Yes, we are called in Christ to take risks. Jesus took risks all the time. He leads – reveals the way the flock should dare to go. There were plenty of voices both around and within Jesus saying *“Don’t do it! Don’t stick your neck out. Play it safe. Stay within the cozy boundaries, remain secure.”* Yet Jesus went out and took risks to the glory of God.

He left home proclaiming a message that many people did not want to hear. He gathered disciples of questionable standing and background. He associated with undesirable characters like a Roman centurion, despised tax collectors, and foreign women. He touched lepers, violated the Sabbath and spent time in a cemetery with a raving lunatic. He told radical stories, challenged accepted wisdom, and created havoc in the temple market – he was a bit of a rabble-rouser. Our good shepherd is a risk taker, and we are called to follow him. Not just where things are virtuous and comfortable, but also where the world appears dangerous and profane.

Jesus is the gate for the fold and leads the flock out onto the slopes. Through him we may eagerly come for rest and through him we dare to go out – to take risks. According to Peter’s letter, Christ is both *shepherd and guardian of our souls*. He knows his own sheep by name – we are not insignificant but precious. He leads us to luxuriant pasture – to find nourishment in the sometimes-perilous world – to experience and share its abundance.

He leads us to what we need: food, water, air – true security, deep rest, and real love. Trusting Jesus frees us to enjoy all those good gifts as fully as God gives them. When the Lord is our shepherd, we experience abundant life that no thief can take away. When Jesus is the gate, we no longer need to be gatekeepers ourselves – worrying about who’s in and who’s out. Jesus is our Lord and shepherd and so we need fear no evil – surely, as we follow him, goodness and mercy will follow us. Amen

➤ *You, Lord, are both lamb and shepherd* 356

Offering and Prayer *Praise God from whom all blessings flow* 306

*“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”*: the words of the Psalm celebrate God’s overflowing goodness and mercy in our lives. We offer God our gifts trusting that God’s goodness and mercy will keep flowing into the world God made.

**God with a tender heart, we thank you for the care you offer to us as our Shepherd. Bless the gifts we offer so they might spread your abundant love to lives in need of caring. Bless us so that we may care for the world as we follow Jesus day by day. Amen**

† Pastoral Prayers and the Lord’s Prayer

Wise and generous God, shepherd of our lives, we are thankful this day for all you provide to sustain us. You call our weary souls to rest – you bless us with the promise of new life. You gather us around tables of friendship to draw strength from one another. Thank you for signs of your goodness and mercy we can treasure each day.

Loving and listening God, shepherd of the world, we bring you our prayers for others, for friends and enemies, neighbours and strangers alike. We pray for people who are struggling with illness, loneliness, grief or sadness...

*Walk with them through dark days and steep valleys.*

We pray for people in countries and communities where it is not safe to live out their faith or express their identity and their views openly...

*Walk with them through dark days and steep valleys.*

We pray for victims of discrimination and acts of hatred – all those who fear violence day by day...

*Walk with them through dark days and steep valleys.*

We pray for journalists and advocates of justice who live under threat for telling the truth...

Walk with them through dark days and steep valleys.

We pray for all communities of every faith, and for local organizations and businesses that face difficulty reorganizing and the pressure of economic challenges...

Walk with them through dark days and steep valleys.

We pray for our families, friends and for ourselves, as well as those in the news whose situations tug at our hearts...

Walk with us all through dark days and steep valleys.

We offer these prayers and our unspoken concerns to you, in the name of the Risen Jesus who asks us to pray together... ***Our Father, who art in heaven – hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come – thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen***

➤ ***Living God, your joyful Spirit***

***666 (Alt tune: 534)***

### Blessing

Go in peace, sure that the Good Shepherd walks beside you. May God lead you to places of rest and renewal – may Christ give you courage on the journey – may the Holy Spirit fill your hearts with joy and generosity – and may the blessing of Creator, Christ and Spirit, dwell in your hearts today and always.

➤ ***Jump with joy***

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