

**“HOW LUCKY YOU ARE!”**  
***Psalm 23; John 10:11-18***  
**Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor**

I recently saw a classified ad that read, *“Lost — One Dog, brown hair with several bald spots. Right leg broken due to auto accident. Right left hip hurt. Right eye missing. Left ear bitten off in dog fight. Answers to the name ‘Lucky’”!*

Lucky? Of course this dog is lucky! For with all those things wrong with him, this dog is fortunate enough to have somebody who wants him, somebody who is willing to go to the effort and the expense of putting a classified ad in the newspaper in order to try to get him back. What a lucky dog he is!

What a lucky person you are! For with all that other people may think is wrong with you, all of your own feelings of disappointment and inadequacy, there is someone who cares deeply, someone who went to a lot more effort than putting a classified ad in the newspaper to find you. And that someone is God!

A woman who lives alone in an apartment recently told me that she sets the alarm on her clock radio to a talk station so she will hear the sound of a human voice in the morning when she wakes up. Many people in our city are lonely and alone. Would it make any difference to anybody if you didn’t get out of bed tomorrow morning? Would it make any difference at all? My friend, it would matter to God.

This morning’s Scriptures concern our relationship with God, or I should say, God’s relationship with us, for God is the initiator. In the first chapter of Genesis, we are told that God created us in order to have a relationship with us. In a rural environment, the Psalmist looked out over the meadows and saw shepherds lovingly caring for their sheep, and he drew an analogy between this gentle image and the love and care that God shows for his people. We are told that there is not one farm left in Cuyahoga County. Most of us are far removed from the bleating sheep folds and the role of shepherds in the care and nurture of sheep. Yet all of us have seen enough pictures of a kindly Jesus holding a lamb that we get the idea this metaphor is seeking to convey.

In John’s Gospel, we find Jesus contrasting the mindset of a shepherd with that of a hired hand. Today we might describe a shepherd as a small business owner. He or she is fully committed to the enterprise. Everything that counts in that person’s life: his time, her dreams, his finances — are all wrapped up in the person’s work. You know people such as that, and so do I. In contrast, the focus of an employee’s life will often be elsewhere, and as committed as he or she might be to the job, other commitments come into play at the moment of crisis. Jesus tells the disciples that he is ready to put himself in harm’s way for their sake. His commitment is the commitment of a small business owner. Jesus’ life and destiny are intertwined with that of his

disciples.

Most meaningful to me is the story of the lost sheep in Luke 15, where the shepherd risks life and limb to rescue one lost lamb. Ninety-nine are safe in the fold. Yet so important is the individual sheep that the shepherd ventures out, risking his safety and expending his energy for one sheep. Yes, we are lucky, because God is willing to spend all heaven's energy on one person, even when that one person is you, even when that one person is me. How lucky we are!

When I am preparing for a funeral or a memorial service, I always ask the family if there are favorite Scriptures they would like to have read at the service for their loved one. The most often requested Scripture is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. I am not surprised, for this Psalm chronicles God's loving care for his people — God's care for you and for me.

Sometimes we think of shepherds as passive and mild-mannered people, who don't really do much except keep an eye on the sheep, kind of the ancient equivalent of a security guard. But the role of the shepherd is not passive at all. Shepherds must be strong and resourceful. They must protect the sheep from the attack of wild animals. They must guard the sheep against theft by robbers who try to steal them. They must provide for the physical needs of the flock: food and water, protection from the elements and from predators. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm celebrates the fact that God not only provides these things for us, but he does so in lavish abundance. One of the commentators suggests that we make a list of what we receive from God. Reflect with me on these verses, and you will see what he is talking about.

*"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."* The truth is that while we may have a lot of "wants," God gives us everything we really need to live a full, free life. A recently published book documents the fact that the problem of critical shortages in our world today is an issue of distribution, not supply. There is enough food to feed every man, woman and child on this planet. There is enough clean water for everyone. Our problem is one of distribution, not supply. God gives us what we need. Our problem is a lack of sharing, not a lack of resources.

Last Friday and Saturday my wife and I went with his family to the northern Pennsylvania/New York border to the little town of Genesee to bury the ashes of longtime beloved church member Gordon Rowe. While we were there we walked through the lush, green pastures where mountain springs create clear, flowing streams of crystal clear water. There in the Allegheny Mountains, I thought of the words of this psalm. There is something about the countryside that restores our souls.

I have heard an interesting reflection about the verse, *"He makes me lie down in green pastures."* I do not believe that God causes illness, but sometimes God makes us lie down — due to the fact that we are sick or exhausted — and when we lie down, we instinctively look up. Sometimes we have to be struck down before we will stop and reflect. Does God have to make you lie down in order to get your attention?

One of the reasons the Bible continues to be a best-seller in spite of the negative press that religion gets in our day is that the Bible in general and the Psalms in particular are so true to life. Nowhere in this book is there a sugar-coated picture of our existence. Following the beautiful and idyllic and somewhat romantic verse about green pastures and still waters and God's leading us in right paths comes the reality of death and dark valleys. Into every human life will come tragedy, sorrow, heartache and loss. It's not a question of "if." It's only a matter of "when."

When problems come into your life and mine, the Psalmist declares, *"I will fear no evil."*

Why? “*For you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*” I have told the story before of a couple of teenage boys who bought their mother an inflatable doll to sit on the front seat of her car so that when she had to travel at night as part of her job it would not appear that she was alone in the car. The truth is, she was never alone, for God was always by her side.

If we follow the path of righteousness and do what we believe God is calling us to do, we will find that we have enemies, no matter how much we try to get along and be conciliatory towards other people. When I was a District Superintendent, one of the hardest things I had to deal with was the fact that some people, both parishioners and clergy, did not like me, simply because of the role that I had to play and the job I was expected to do. Some people are uncomfortable when I walk in the room, simply because I am a pastor. Some people are uncomfortable with you simply because you come to church on Sunday and see to it that your kids are in Sunday school and have the courage to say “no” to some of the excesses of our society. God promises us not only to sustain us in the presence of these antagonists, but to provide for us in lavish abundance. He prepares a table to nourish and refresh and sustain us. Our cup overflows with his blessings.

When we are invited to God’s table, we need to remember that we are guests. God is the host, and God invites everyone. It is not up to us to decide who the other guests will be. How lucky we are that God invites everyone, for God includes you and God includes me. **How lucky we are!**

Then the psalmist reminds us of what we should already know, but continue to need reminders of. God will be with us, not just today, not just when the sun is shining and when we have the world by the tail, but all the days of our lives — even when we experience the dark valleys, the taunting of enemies, and all the other negative experiences of life. God will never leave us nor forsake us. **How lucky we are!**

Recently I had a conversation with someone who said, “My son has a good job, but he is not content. He wants to make a difference with his life.” All of us need to feel that our lives have meaning and purpose. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm tells us that God has a purpose for each of us. There is a reason why you are here. What does God want us to do with our lives? The psalm gives us a clue: God wants us to dwell in God’s house all the days of our lives. In other words, by staying close to God, we will find the direction and purpose we seek.

Not only do the Scriptures encourage us to stay close to God, they also encourage us to stay close to each other. There is a popular heresy in our society today that proclaims that the life of faith is pretty much a solitary thing, between “me and Jesus.” In fact, some would suggest that other people may even distract us from our focus on the things of the spirit. Nothing could be further from the message of the Gospel! Twentieth century German theologian Karl Barth said that “*there is no such thing as an individual Christian.*”(2) The faith was born in community, and it is lived out in community. Did you ever think about the fact that in the English language there is no separate, singular form of the word “sheep?” Who we are is bound up with the entire flock: with other believers who break bread and recite prayers with us, with those sheep whom Jesus knows and God sees, some of whom we can scarcely bring ourselves to acknowledge and welcome, let alone live alongside or die to protect. Those who say they believe in Jesus but want nothing to do with other believers or with the church are misguided. They are missing a great deal of what the faith is all about. God intends that we live in community one with another. There is no such thing as an individual Christian.

The God who cares for us calls us to care for others. We need the friendship and fellowship of other people, and other people need us. That's what it means to be part of the flock, part of the family of God. Who is crying out for your love? For whom do you need to risk life and limb? To whom do you need to reach out?

Many were blessed by our recent Lenten study, *Three Simple Rules*, written by Bishop Rueben Job. In an earlier book, *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*, that I am currently using for daily devotions, Bishop Job tells the story of his family's encounter with a stray dog. He writes, "As I drove up the driveway, our children raced out the front door and met me at the car. Before I could get my suitcase out of the car, they were telling me about Puddles, the dog that had followed them home from the little store a few blocks away. We had talked nearly every day about the dog we were going to get when we were able to move into the country. Everyone wanted a big dog like a Dalmatian or a black Labrador. But as I got out the car, I noticed a dog that was small and scraggly, of mixed origin, very soon to be a mother, and very personable. The chorus of affirmation for the dog from our children was compelling. But I gave no clear answer to their question, "Can we keep Puddles?" I did not want to adopt a dog like this, and I knew I had to move quickly to make sure we did not have a dog and a litter of puppies on our hands.

"I suggested that after supper we talk about what to do with the dog. When we were all settled in the family room, and with the dog in the garage, I asked each of the children to tell me why he or she thought we should keep Puddles when we could get a beautiful and large dog. Each of them had good reason: she needed a home; we would enjoy the puppies; she would be a watchdog. Last I turned to our eight-year-old son and asked him what we should do with the dog and why. His eyes filled with tears and said, "We should keep her." I asked him for his reason why we should keep this scraggly dog. He responded through his tears, "Because she loves me."

We kept Puddles. She was with us while our children grew up and when they called home from college and career, their first question always was, "How is Puddles?" Bishop Job reflects, "She lived with us 17 years because one little boy loved her enough to save her."(3)

Somebody loved you enough to save you, too. **How lucky you are!**

*Prayer:* Dear God, thank you for your love and care for us. Help us to reach out with that same love and care to those in the next pew, to those in our community, and to those in our world. We pray in name of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Notes:

1. Quoted in *The Christian Century*. Vol. 126. No. 8, p. 21.
2. Shawchuck, Norman & Job, Rueben. *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003., pp. 191-192.