



Welcome & Prayer

Welcome to worship. Many of us would have preferred to be together in person but we are grateful that technology allows us to come together online as we continue to explore the 23rd Psalm. We pray that God will be present to each one of us and enable us to be present with one another in spirit as we come together in the name of Jesus. Amen

Psalm 23

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Luke 15: 3 – 7

Optional preparation before the service:
Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34

Sermon

The sermon can be accessed on <http://www.burleymethodist.org> and the text is available at the end of this sheet

Song

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly trust in Jesus' name

***Christ alone, Cornerstone
Weak made strong in the Savior's love
Through the storm, He is Lord, Lord of all***

When darkness seems to hide His face
I rest on His unchanging grace

In every high and stormy gale
My anchor holds within the veil

Christ alone, Cornerstone...

When he shall come with trumpet sound
Oh, may I then in Him be found
Dressed in His righteousness alone
Faultless, stand before the throne

Christ alone, Cornerstone...

Prayers

Gracious God, in recent days we have looked backward,
remembering both the horrors of the battlefield
and the joyful celebration of war's end.
It is not long before we will enter into a time of looking forward –
anticipating, longing, waiting for Emmanuel to come.

Help us, in the holiness of the here-and-now, to be present.
Enable us to see this moment with clarity.

We praise your name for all that You are and all that You have done.
(time for reflection or sharing)

We are repentant for our failures and grateful that we are forgiven.
(time for reflection or sharing)

We thank you for your loving us, for calling our name, for pursuing us with overwhelming, never-ending love.
Bring to our minds the blessings that we can be thankful for today, whatever our circumstances.
(time for reflection or sharing)

We pray for our community, for our nation and the world in a time of turbulence and uncertainty.
(time for reflection or sharing)

Hold us now and enable us to follow our Shepherd with faithfulness and joy
as we look back on the struggles and joys of the past, thankful for your goodness,
and look hopefully toward the future, trusting in mercy. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

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 trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
Amen

Hymn

Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,
tender and true;
out of the heart of the Father above,
streaming to me and to you:
wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
Why do they roam?
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
Home, weary wanderer, home!
Wonderful love
Dwells in the heart of the Father above.

Jesus the Saviour, this Gospel to tell,
Joyfully came;
Came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
Sharing their sorrow and shame;
Seeking the lost,
Saving, redeeming at measureless cost.

Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,
Come and abide,
Lifting my life, till it rises above
Envy and falsehood and pride;
Seeking to be
Lowly and humble, a learner of Thee

Blessing

Reflection: “Surely Goodness and Mercy Shall Follow Me All the Days of My Life”

Wendy Walker

Wouldn't it be nice if Psalm 23 went like this: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. This world has nothing but green pastures and all waters are still. We will never walk through the valley of the shadow of death, there is no evil. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my friends.*

A Psalm where the world hasn't fallen apart, where sheep stay safely within the shepherd's fold, a Psalm that imagines Eden without the apple. That's a Psalm I'd enjoy reciting every morning! But we all know that sooner or later I would climb out of bed, stumble downstairs, rub my eyes, boil the kettle... and as I switch on the news I'd be reminded that such a Psalm would be a lie.

This week marked eighty two years since Krystallnacht – “night of the broken glass” – when citizens of Nazi Germany took to the streets, smashing the windows of Jewish-owned businesses as well as homes, schools and synagogues, hounding down innocent people and incarcerating 30 000 Jewish men. This week also marked fifty-eight years since the United Nations acknowledged and condemned the abhorrent system of apartheid in South Africa – a racist policy implementing unthinkable cruelty, violence and oppression.

This week exposed the magnitude of division and hatred in the United States.

And this week is yet another Sunday that we meet without greeting each other... take hold of TV remotes instead of hands... pray without being present in one place... worship without lifting our voices... just as some of us were settling into a new way of worshipping together in our churches.

Experience – our own and that of history – tells us that there are times when the pastures are scorched not green, the waters muddy not clear, and the valleys dark and frightening. Scripture resonates with such experience, for example, in the sombre shepherding imagery in Ezekiel 37. God has this to say to the leaders of Israel: “You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.” And to those who perpetuate injustice, God cries: “Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?”

The history books and the Bible and the newspapers all agree on the presence of evil and suffering in the world.

It isn't easy to accept. We want a table without enemies, fields without fires, routes without dark valleys. No wonder preachers of the prosperity gospel have always gained popularity through their promise of health and wealth for the faithful. No wonder conspiracy theories run rampant in difficult times. I've been told that for some people it is just too hard to fathom the fact of bad things happening. There is a need to explain it, thereby coming closer to controlling it. It is easier to believe there is an underlying story with heroes and villains.

But the story that we live for is not a human story, it is a God story.

It is the story of a God who knows his sheep and calls them each by name.

Today we explore Psalm 23: 6 “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.” A bit of reading up told me that the word translated as follow does not quite capture the original word. This isn't the following of ducklings behind their mums or Facebook users keeping an eye on their favourite pages. It is the same word that is translated as “hounding down” in a Psalm that describes an enemy's chase.¹ It is the word used in Exodus to describe Pharaoh pursuing the Israelites with chariots. The word denotes a vigorous pursuit.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me... will run after me... will seek me out.

¹ Psalm 109: 16

A shepherd who follows and searches and finds. Jesus told a parable about exactly that.² There is a farmer who has one hundred sheep and loses one. The story continues as he leaves the other ninety-nine in the open field. I have to be honest – when I read that, it jolted me, and I found myself asking questions:

Why are they in an open field to begin with? Wouldn't they be safer behind a fence? Why leave the gate open?

But I know that this argument will take me back a long way. It will take me all the way to the Garden of Eden where I will stand in front of that tree bearing forbidden fruit and suggest that God builds a fence around that too. My longing for an unfallen world – one without evil and violence and death – can leave me thinking for just a minute that it might have been better to restrict freedom of choice in the first place. But I have a feeling that God take that suggestion with a gentle smile and say, "I love my children too much for that."

If human beings had been placed on earth pre-programmed to obey God in all things, they would not have been able to make the choice that led them into brokenness and sin. But they could never have chosen love. God didn't want grovelling slaves to serve him. God wanted children to love. And God left the gate open. We know what happened next. Creation fell apart. Human beings broke God's heart. Yet in spite of it all...

Goodness and mercy has pursued us.

When we go into dark valleys, God goes into dark valleys. When we try to run away, he hems us in behind and before. When we are trapped in desolate places, he seeks us out. The shepherd leaves the fold and descends into the valley. God leaves heaven and descends into the vulnerability of human form and the violence of death on the cross.

Goodness and mercy has found us.

The parable of the lost sheep has something better than a happy ending. In verse 5, the shepherd finds the sheep and joyfully puts it on his shoulders. Joy doesn't wait for the end of the story. It doesn't wait for the wolf to be killed. It doesn't wait for the sheep to pay penance for being lost in the first place or the neighbours to join the party. Joy comes the moment that the sheep is held in the arms of the shepherd.

God has not promised us a life without hardship. But God promises this:

I will hold the leaders accountable for my flock. I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.

I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

I will place over them one shepherd.

We may need to wait some time before suffering comes to an end.

But not love. We don't have to wait until we have done enough good deeds to make up for our failures. We are already loved by the God who call us by name.

And not joy. We don't have to wait until wars have ended or church doors are thrown open or we share the bread and wine. We find joy as the shepherd lifts us onto his shoulders.

And not hope. We don't have to wait until injustice is a thing of the past or a Covid vaccine is found. We don't have to wait until the final defeat of the enemy or new life to spring up in the valley of death. We don't have to wait for the winter to end or for morning to come.

Our hope is in Christ - who carries us home.

And the gate is wide open for all who will come.

² Luke 15