All we like Sheep

Yes, we do all like sheep, don’t we?

The arrogance of preachers

There is a particular tendency of preachers to be something of know-it-alls. Not just about things that they should know something about (like Bible Study and theology and hymnody and prayer), but also things that they think they know something about.

I used to be a know-it-all about sheep.

Now, of course, that’s odd, because I’m a city boy. Never did see a sheep that wasn’t at a fair, or in a curry, or off in the distance as we drove to another city. But I’m a biblical guy, so I thought I knew something about sheep. After fall, I’ve preached about sheep a lot. I’ve read books and commentaries and Bible Studies about sheep and pasturing, particularly in the Ancient Near East around the early Bronze Age. In fact, I’m a legitimate expert.

A few years back, I started at a church that needed an interim minister. It was in the area I was living in, but out of the city. In fact, decidedly rural. If you look up Kemble, Ontario, you’ll find it has a population of … well, you won’t find that information, because it’s been rolled up into the Township of Georgian Bluffs. To give you an idea of the size of Kemble, this is a notice posted on the local website: “The Kemble Arena is not being used at this time except for the carpet bowlers.”

That’s how small it was.

Now, that didn’t stop me from preaching about sheep when those readings came around. I may have used this quote occasionally:

Psalm 23, Matt Pollock, [A Plain Account](http://www.aplainaccount.org/#!Psalm-23/bhul0/570c0edc0cf29719a384ec27) 2016

* "If the metaphor were not so strong growing up in church, if the angels had not made that proclamation to those lowly shepherds on that "beautiful, scandalous night" I wouldn't have the slightest idea about what a shepherd does or how they were perceived in the Ancient Near East. But somehow the strength of the metaphor has been preserved. It has been the church that has preserved it for us and for that we can be thankful."

So the image has been preserved, and we love it, most of us. But we don’t all understand it. We are from the world of shepherding.

On this particular Sunday, when I was shaking hands at the door, one of the church ladies introduced me to a tall blonde teenager. “This is Rayleen. She’s a real shepherdess.” [Rayleen quietly corrected that to “shepherd.”] But I suddenly realized that my expertise, based on an outdated and long-romanticised description of an ancient practice, was suddenly being challenged by an expert.

Over the next few years, I found out more about sheepherding, thanks to Rayleen and her parents and others in the community. I have a new respect for those who raise and care for animals as their livelihood.

This often happens, by the way, if we’re lucky. We manage to run into unexpected people who can teach us what we think we already know. By God’s grace, we might still learn something.

But, meeting with Rayleen also encouraged me to think more deeply about the image of shepherding, and why Psalm 23 in particular is so popular. In many ways, it should be outdated and unhelpful, as few of us are intimately acquainted with the work and practice of shepherding. I realize that I had simply inherited the image, and used and used it so repeatedly that it was comfortable and comforting, but it wasn’t saying anything new.

So, I decided to write my own version. It’s at the end of this sermon. But, before we get there, I want to encourage your own creative writing project. Following, you will find some paraphrases of Psalm 23. Our scripture reader, Helena, read from two versions of the Psalm, and even though they say the same thing, they each sound quite different. The ones that follow are even more so, as they explore what the psalm means by using different images for God’s strong and tender care: God as a pilot, a soul shepherd, a choir director, and others. I invited to read through them, slowly and carefully. Some won’t connect at all. Some will get you thinking.

Then, write your own. It’s for your own use, so you can be as creative as you like. I won’t force a structure on you, but the elements of the Psalm are quite simple:

1. God provides for our needs
2. That includes peace, and calm, and confidence
3. That confidence and peace carry us through dark times
4. And we arrive home, where we have what we need.

Psalm 23

## The Lord is my pilot (Psalm 23 – Maritime version)

The Lord is my pilot; therefore I shall not drift.  
He leads me across the dark waters;  
He steers me in steep channels; he keeps my log.  
He guides me by the star of holiness for his name’s sake.  
I shall dread no danger, for you are with me.  
You prepare a harbour for me in the homeland of eternity;  
You anoint the waves with oil, my ship rides calmly.  
Surely, sunlight and starlight shall favour me on the voyage I take,  
And I will rest in the port of my God for ever.  
Amen

## Aviator’s Psalm 23

The Lord is my Sky Pilot[[1]](#footnote-1),  
I will not be afraid.  
He lets me fly over green pastures  
And guides me across many waters,  
As He refreshes my soul.

He elevates me to the Sun above the clouds,  
Where His name is exalted.

Even though I fly through times  
Of turbulence and stormy weather,  
I will fear no fall;  
For You are with me,  
Your stick and compass  
They bring me in.

You prepare a landing for me  
In the presence of adverse conditions.  
You bless my flight with ample fuel  
And my plane flies perfectly.

Surely good times and joy will follow me  
All the flying hours of my life,  
Then I will fly west and land  
In the Lord’s aerodrome forever.

## My Soul Shepherding Psalm

*By Bill Gaultiere, SoulShepherding.org © 2007*

The Lord Jesus is my Soul Shepherd

who meets all my needs and makes me smile.

He gets me to stop working and to relax

with him in his Father’s loving arms.

He takes me into a quiet place

to be still and know that he is God and I am loved.

He heals and rejuvenates my whole being

with his grace from the inside out.

He holds my hand at the crossroads

and walks me onto the path of life.

Even though I go through dark and difficult times

I don’t fear anything bad because you are with me.

You discipline me in love and converse patiently with me

to bring out the best in me.

You prepare a celebration to bless and honor me —

right in front of my enemies.

You anoint me with your Spirit to minister to others

out of the overflow of your love to me.

I can count on your generous favor and tender mercy

coming to me wherever I go. I will live in the presence of Christ as his beloved

in all things and at all times.

## Psalm 23: A David Psalm

*From The Message. A paraphrase by Eugene Peterson © 1994*

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 at 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.

## [Looking Back On a Full Life](http://www.circle-m.ca/crcn/archive_letters/1Newsletter.htm) – Psalm 23

*Here is paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm written by James Taylor in his wonderful collection,*[*Everyday Psalms*](http://www.woodlakebooks.com/search/results/inventory/Books/Bestsellers/Everyday-Psalms)*(Wood Lake Books).  I highly recommend the book!*

God has walked with me; I could ask nothing more.  
God has given me green meadows to laugh in,  
clear streams to think beside, untrodden paths to explore.  
  
When I thought the world rested on my shoulders,  
God put things into perspective.  
When I lashed out at an unfair world, God calmed me down.  
When I drifted into harmful ways, God straightened me out.  
God was with me all the way.  
  
I do not know what lies ahead, but I am not afraid.  
I know you will be with me.  
Even in death, I will not despair.  
You will comfort and support me.  
Though my eye dims and my mind dulls,  
you will continue to care about me.  
Your touch will soothe the tension in my temples;  
my fears will fade away.  
I am content.  
  
In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with me.  
All through life, I have found goodness in people.  
When life ends, I expect to be gathered  
into the ultimate goodness of God.

—written by James Taylor, in *Everyday Psalms* and posted on the [Canadian Rural Church Network](http://www.circle-m.ca/crcn/) website.

## The Lord is my Choirmaster

The Lord is my choirmaster, I shall never be out of step with the music.  
He leads me in songs of praise and thanksgiving as I remember all His love and goodness to me.  
He causes me to hum softly as I go about my daily tasks.  
He sings me a quiet lullaby to bring me rest at the close of the day.  
He teaches me a restful, quiet, air to sing which brings peace to my troubled spirit.  
Sometimes as I feel God's power and majesty my soul is lifted up in a symphony of swelling music; I sing out in joy and praise, letting myself go and losing myself in the glorious sound of the orchestra, full of confidence, pride, happiness and enjoyment.  
But there are times when the music is silent, or strident, or unfamiliar.  
At those times I look to my choirmaster to guide me and keep me on the right note.  
Then once again there will be harmony.  
I shall sing happily and my song will bring me joy and inner peace,  
until the day when I shall join in that heavenly chorus above  
with those I have loved and lost awhile.   Amen.

## Prayer: Urban Shepherd

*Written by Mike Riddell, and posted on Jonny Baker Worship Tricks.* [*http://jonnybaker.blogs.com/jonnybaker/2004/10/fractals\_.html*](http://jonnybaker.blogs.com/jonnybaker/2004/10/fractals_.html)

urban shepherd

you lead us through skyscraper canyons

past carbon monoxide

and mirror glass

and busker

you make us to lie down on park benches

and rest beside sewage settlement ponds

you keep our feet on pavement and escalator and lift shaft

and guide us through the back alleys

of our city

though we enter the concrete crevasse

we will not fear the chaos

for you are with us

you grant us a site in the sun

at a sidewalk cafe

where we drink cappuccino and are glad

you give us doughnut stalls

and film festivals and neon signs

surely your goodness and poverty

will follow us all the days of our lives

and we will come at last to the holy city

## “Psalm 23 for Busy People,”

*A paraphrase by Japanese poet Toki Miyashina*

THE LORD IS MY PACE SETTER, I shall not rush,

He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals,

He provides me with images of stillness,

Which restore my serenity.

He leads me in ways of efficiency,

through calmness of mind; and his guidance is peace. Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day,

I will not fret, for his presence is here.

His timelessness, his all-importance will keep me in balance.

He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity,

by anointing my head with his oils of tranquility,

My cup of joyous energy overflows.

Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruit of my hours,

For I shall walk in the pace of my Lord,

and dwell in his house for ever.

## The Hip Hop 23rd Psalm

<https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/2006/01/the-hip-hop-23rd-psalm.aspx>

The Lord is all that, I need for nothing

He allows me to chill.

He keeps me from being heated

And allows me to breathe easy.

He guides my life so that

I can represent and give

Shouts out in his Name.

And even though I walk through

The Hood of death,

I don't back down

For you have my back.

The fact that you have me covered

Allows me to chill.

He provides me with back-up

In front of my player-haters

And I know that I am a baler

And life will be phat

I fall back in the Lord's crib

For the rest of my life.

## The Lord is my Kindergarten Teacher

*Rev. Neil Parker, after reading something by Robert Fulghum*

The Lord is my Kindergarten Teacher. She takes care of me.

She makes me lie down for naps, every day, every day.

She lets me spend time in the reading corner, or drawing, when I don’t feel like talking.

I love being at kindergarten. I have learned to wash my hands, and to share.

Even on days when it is cold and rainy; even when the big kids are bullies; even when I can’t remember how to tie my shoes

She is there to help me. She shows me how, and she lets me try.

She makes sure that there are enough snacks for everybody, and there is always enough milk and juice.

I would like to be with my kindergarten teacher for ever and ever. I will not forget her.

1. I haven’t edited this, but this sounds awkward to me, because “Sky Pilot” is a long-standing reference to military chaplains, even those who served with the army. It’s based on a book by Ralph Connor, “[The Sky Pilot, a Tale of the Foothills](https://www.amazon.com/Sky-Pilot-Tale-Foothills-ebook/dp/B0082RWAYC/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=).” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)