

The God We Have

Text: Psalm 23

Hymn: "The King of Love My Shepherd Is" (LSB 709)

What kind of God do you have? You're in the wilderness and the desert, this wasteland of sin and death. What kind of God do you have? You're a sheep, harassed and helpless, surrounded by enemies on every side. What kind of God do you have?

You're on a journey, seeking a destination that always seems farther and further away. What kind of God do you have?

The answer to this question is vitally important. It is literally the difference between life and death. The wilderness is unforgiving. It will chew up and spit back out those who are unprepared and unprotected. Sheep in the wilderness are easy prey to enemies who are always seeking their destruction. The kind of God that you have will determine whether you journey with confidence or with fear.

Make no mistake: The other sheep are watching you. Every sheep is trying to make its own way through the wilderness. And each of them is asking the other, What kind of God do you have?

So how do you answer? What kind of God do you have? What do your eyes tell you? Your eyes see poverty and need and lack. Your eyes look at your own bank account and they see just barely enough. They look at your budget and see too much red. Your eyes see the reality of the wilderness, the scarcity of the wasteland. And fear and worry are the result.

So, what do you do? You cling more tightly to that which you think is your own. Your own time, your own possessions, your own money. Fear and worry drive you to

hold back when the offering plate comes around. It causes you to tighten your fist when your neighbor has a need. Fear and worry cause congregations to hunker down and think only of themselves. Your eyes see everything aligned against you. And you live in fear. Your life is not lived in confidence, in trust, in hope but in worry. The wilderness stands against you and it mocks you saying, "What kind of God do you have?"

Your eyes see the difficulty of your road through the wilderness. They see that it is fraught with dangers each and every step of the way. Your eyes see suffering, suffering that you know will one day affect you, suffering that is already affecting you. They see cancer and Alzheimer's and auto-immune diseases and a whole host of maladies with a hundred different names. They see you suffering. They see a world filled with suffering. Your eyes watch the news and they're overwhelmed.

Finally, your eyes see death. Death is all around us in the wilderness as the bleached bones of the other sheep remind us. No one gets out of the wilderness alive. Your eyes see that the journey cannot be completed on your own, that the road is too hard, too winding, too dangerous. Your eyes see death which proclaims to you that the journey itself is futile, that there is no hope. As a natural sheep cannot survive in the desert by itself, so the wilderness will eventually grind you up. It will destroy you, leaving you simply another statistic of the wasteland.

Your eyes give you only fear, only worry, only despair. They present to you a picture so bleak that it's terrifying. They see no hope of escape. And so you cry out in despair, What kind of God do I have?

Don't trust your eyes. They tell you of a God who has left you, abandoned you in the wilderness, a God who is holding back His goodness. But they are wrong. Don't

trust your eyes. Trust your ears. Close your eyes and listen: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

What kind of God do you have? You have a God who is your Shepherd and you shall not want. Your ears hear of a God who walks with you in the wilderness, who leads and guides you through the wasteland, to the Promised land. You have a God who walked this path Himself, who journeyed in the wilderness in your place, even unto death. You have a God who said, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” You have a God who laid down His life, pouring out His blood to defeat the wilderness, to deliver lost sheep from the corruption, the scarcity, and the death of the wilderness. He paid the price for the sin that makes the wilderness so harsh, that gives the wasteland its power. And when He rose on the third day He stepped forth from the grave as the Good Shepherd, seeking out lost sheep, finding them in mercy, and guiding them to the Promised Land He won for them, bearing them on His shoulders, taking them to their destination.

Not by their strength but only through His.

That same God feeds you on the green pastures of His Word. He nourishes you in the still waters of Holy Baptism. This sanctuary, this place, is an oasis where you receive nourishment for the journey, where you’re refreshed and strengthened for the road ahead. Your enemies are all around you but you need not fear. His table, the table of His body and blood, gives forgiveness and sins, life, and salvation; your enemies cannot take what He gives to you here! In this place your ears hear of His death and His resurrection. He restores your soul by forgiving your sins, your sins of fear and worry and of clinging to what you think is your own and He makes you whole

and righteous before His Father by applying His death and resurrection to you. Raising you on the pastures of His word, by washing you in the quiet waters of baptism, by giving you the feast at the Table of His Body and Blood.

Your ears hear the Good Shepherd's voice, guiding you through the wilderness. Death no longer threatens you. The wilderness has been defanged, because you belong to the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for the sheep, only to take it up again in glory.

Now your path through the wilderness is carved by the cross, watered by his blood. The sheep know their shepherd's voice and it leads them home. Neither scarcity nor disaster, neither disease nor any enemy, will be able to keep you from your promised destination, the heaven that he won for you.

What kind of God do you have? Your ears hear that there is no more want, that this God, this Shepherd, has given you all that you need. He'll anoint your head with oil; your cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The One who gave up his own life for the sheep to give to them an eternal treasure that will never fade away will certainly provide all good things out of his bountiful goodness. Goodness and mercy pursue you. They chase after you all of your days, because you have a God of abundance. A God who delights to give. Your ears hear God's promises. Those promises create faith. And you live in that faith, no longer in fear, no longer in worry. With St. Paul, you can face any and every circumstance with confidence; you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

We too can do all things through Christ who strengthens us, even sacrificially give of ourselves for the good of Christ's kingdom. Even serve our neighbors in their time of need. Even boldly pursue the Lord's work as a congregation. Because the Lord is our shepherd. We do not live in fear. The Lord is our shepherd. And in Him there is no more want, no more scarcity, no more need. He will provide, according to His good and gracious will.

What kind of God do you have? Your God is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who took on human flesh, who became one of the sheep, who gave up his life for the sheep, who on the cross prayed the 22nd Psalm, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?", that we might pray the 23rd, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." We now live by what our ears hear not by what our eyes see. And what our ears hear are green pastures, overflowing cups, victory, and eternal life in the house of the Lord.

What kind of God do you have? The God who defeated the wilderness, who leads you through it, who gives you confidence even in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death, because His rod crushes death's power. His staff drives away the wolves. The Lord is your shepherd. You shall not want.

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