

## 2021-07-18 Sheep and Shepherds

### *Sheep and Shepherds*

July 18, 2021

Pastor Scott Austin

[artisanchurch.com](http://artisanchurch.com)

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of James Sconfitto]

Good morning. Alright, the reading this morning is from Jeremiah 23, verses 1–6:

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. <sup>2</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. <sup>3</sup> Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. <sup>4</sup> I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

<sup>5</sup>The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>6</sup>In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

And now in Mark [6:30–34]:

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup> He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. <sup>32</sup> And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. <sup>33</sup> Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. <sup>34</sup> As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

## 2021-07-18 Sheep and Shepherds

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

I'm debating whether or not to start by telling you a funny TikTok meme video that I saw this week – thumbs up or thumbs down on that? [chuckles as audience responds] My wife shared it with me, apropos of nothing, and it was a woman saying, “me on my deathbed,” and she was kind of, you know, laying back like this – or “me at my funeral,” it said – she's laying back like this in the sort of coffin pose, and then it cuts away to “my kids”, which is really just her, but from a different angle, right? And the angle is the kid looking over like this going, “Can I have a snack?” [laughter]

And that rather reminds me of our Lord Jesus. [laughter] But actually, in all seriousness – not in *all* seriousness, but truly, Jesus just wanted to get away for a few minutes with his disciples there, right? They hadn't had anything to eat. And then, sure enough, the people saw him and kept going, right? And he had compassion on them, because he saw that they were like sheep without a shepherd.

So, as you may know, if you've been paying attention here at Artisan for the last few weeks and couple of months, we've been using the lectionary this summer to guide our scripture readings in worship. A lectionary is like a dictionary for lectors, for readers. And sometimes, especially in the summer when we're kind of in between these holier, high, more ceremonial seasons of the year, sometimes the lectionary just gives you a bunch of texts, and there's not really a ton tying it all together, right? And then sometimes, the opposite is true and it's very thematic, and all of the readings are tied together by a central image or an idea, and that's the case today. Almost all of the readings in the lectionary have imagery about sheep and shepherds.

[a child says “hi” in the background repeatedly] Hi! [said aside to that child]

And I can't think of something that's more culturally relevant than sheep and shepherds in 21st century American culture. [chuckles] I mean, the truth is, except when I've been in Ireland, I don't think I've ever intentionally thought about sheep in my entire life. And yet, the scriptures are actually quite full of these images, these metaphors, and I think with a little bit of effort we can kind of find some meaning in them.

At any rate, mostly what I want to do is get us to a place where I can lead you in a really brief study exercise of that Psalm that we heard read at the beginning of the service – the 23rd Psalm – but I want to sort-of turn over the soil with some of this shepherding and sheep imagery first

## 2021-07-18 Sheep and Shepherds

by saying this: One of the things that we've keyed in on as a community – in some very specific ways in the last month or two, but really for many years as a church – is the idea of being a safe harbor for people who have experienced toxic religion, or even spiritual abuse.

Now, is that not you? Have you not experienced that in your own life? I am happy for you. The truth is, neither have I. I spoke last week at some length about the way my theological convictions have shifted over the years, but nobody's told me I'm going to burn because of that. Nobody's leaned on me, nobody's manipulated me, nobody has really harmed me in any way in the context of my religious upbringing, right? In case that's ever not been clear, please know that that's what's true for me; that might be what's true for a lot of you – you maybe were raised in a conservative environment, but it was not toxic for you, per se – if that's like, if that's where you're at, because that's where I'm at, I'm happy for you. Let's make sure that we do a good job of listening to people who *have* had that experience. And many of you are in this room who have had that experience of general toxicity, or even something that rises to the level of what I would call spiritual abuse. Alright?

This is most obvious, I think for us these days, in the case of LGBTQ people. And we are so honored to be a church where so many of you who are part of that community have felt safe and welcome and felt like your home, but it is certainly not only the LGBTQ community who have been hurt or harmed in their religious past, and the thing that really unsettles me about this idea is that it would be bad enough if it were just a coincidence – if it just so happened that the people who treated you badly were religious leaders – but it's actually much worse than that, it's much more insidious than that. So often, it is religion that is given as the rationalization. It's religious belief that is used as the *very reason* for the abuse. And if that's been your experience, I'm so deeply sorry that that happened to you, and I want very much to be a pastor who feels safe to you, and I want our community to be a church that feels safe to you.

And so for those of you who are in that group, for whatever reason, I want you to hear just a few of the verses from today's readings again, with some greater clarity, and then I have one of the readings we didn't even get a chance to put into the liturgy that you might find meaningful as well. So, I'll start with that verse from Mark 6, where it says, "Jesus had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." And if you have found yourself in a religious community where the very person who is supposed to be protecting you and caring for you was harming you, know that Jesus looks on you and sees that you are like a sheep without a shepherd. Jesus, who identifies himself as the Good Shepherd.

## 2021-07-18 Sheep and Shepherds

And then, for those moments when you might need to grit your teeth and process a little bit of anger, you could hear the words from the prophet Jeremiah. And so often the prophets of Israel speak in a way that we scold our children for speaking, that we shame our even adults for speaking; they do not comport themselves in a manner befitting people of good religion.

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD.

And another reading for today that, as I mentioned, didn't make it into the liturgy, but it's from the lectionary passages – it's from Ephesians 2, verses 13 and 15 – it says: “But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. He has abolished the law, with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity, in place of the two, thus making peace.”

So, to recap: If you've been cast out by your religious community, if you have spent time without someone to care for you, Jesus has compassion specifically on you. And if you've been scattered and sent away, It's Jesus himself who has gone after you, and he wants to bring you near. The things that have been used to divide us, to dehumanize some of you, those things don't matter, because he has created in himself a new humanity, where all are one. And God will deal with those who have been charged with the care of fragile people, who have neglected that charge and done harm to the very dear ones they were to have protected.

If you happen to be one of those ministers, listening to this sermon somehow, hear this warning from the prophet Jeremiah, and repent. “The Lord will attend to your evil doings.” As you are so fond of saying, this isn't me talking, gang. It's just what the Bible says. Take it up with God; pray for the wisdom to repent of your evil lifestyle. Sometimes I love my job because I get to be the person who speaks so softly to people who need it, and once in a while, so harshly to the people who need it.

In closing today, I want to continue this exploration of sheep and shepherds. I want to lead you in an exercise that the seminary professor I had in my first class led us in, in our first class of seminary. That doesn't mean that it's graduate level difficulty; in fact it's quite the opposite. I loved that he started out this way, because he started us out in a way that basically said, *You're probably thinking too hard about things, and I'm going to help you fix that for a minute.* And then he said, *Sign up for Greek.* [laughter]

## 2021-07-18 Sheep and Shepherds

So, we start out here engaging with this beautiful, ancient text, the 23rd Psalm, in what might seem at first to be a sort-of dry and academic way, but I promise, at least I hope, that it will be worth it. So, we're gonna do a simple little literary analysis exercise, and it involves nothing more complicated than counting the words that appear more than once in Psalm 23. So, you might want to take the Bible out of the seat pocket in the seat in front of you, or if you're at home, you might want to grab a Bible if it's nearby, or just type into Google, "Psalm 23 NRSV", (and that's our translation that'll keep you on the same page as us). And I don't know how much of Psalm 23 fits on the screen the way we've done it, but Aaron, if maybe you could just pop it up there. That probably won't help us too much because it would be helpful to see the whole thing, but that's okay. We, all of us, have Bibles here.

And so, what I want you to do is just look at this thing – and if you had this printed out, you could use, like, different color highlighters, or you could use an underline and then a double underline and then a circle and then an oval and then a rectangle, you know, like, to just mark the repeated occurrences of certain words, okay? So, go ahead and take a look at that for a minute; I'll stop yapping. And I'd like you to just notice – they don't have to be important words, just words that appear more than once.

[pause]

Let's look first at that first stanza, verses 1–3:

- <sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
- <sup>2</sup>       He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
      he leads me beside still waters;
- <sup>3</sup>       he restores my soul.
- He leads me in right paths  
      for his name's sake.

What's the most common word in that passage, in that in that stanza? "Me", "my", and what else? "He". Okay, alright, let's look at the next little grouping:

## 2021-07-18 Sheep and Shepherds

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

my whole life long.

Just six little verses. So, in that second grouping, what is the most common word? Say it nice and loud so I can hear it. Don't be afraid of being wrong. "You", alright, thank you.

So, somebody in the, uh – oh, there's 32 messages in the chat; sorry folks, I'm not gonna be able to catch up with that [chuckles] – [noticing the passage being projected] Oh, thank you! There's the whole thing in one, I appreciate that; I probably should have asked for that in advance, I do apologize.

But we got to the point that I wanted to get to. We were sitting in this seminary classroom, and we had all done this fancy thing with our highlighters or our pens or whatever from the printout of Psalm 23, and we're like, *Yeah, big deal, there's a lot of "he"s in the first part and there's a lot of "you"s in the second part.*

## 2021-07-18 Sheep and Shepherds

Now, this was 2002, I don't think there was as much or as broad, a broadly, sort of, understood movement to think about the gendered pronouns that we use for God. There certainly would have been a theological principle taught that God did not have, you know, a singular gender (that was something that was on our radar in 2002), but the idea that we would maybe stop using masculine pronouns for God, as some of us have done at various times, was not really on the table. So, if you'll pardon me going back in time almost a couple of decades and let's set aside that particular question, although I acknowledge that it's a thorny one for some people, let's just think about the fact that in that first segment, the God pronouns are "he".

All right, grammar heads: which type of pronoun is "he", "she", "it"? [aside to someone in the room] Is that a gang sign, what is that? [chuckles] It's a third-person pronoun, third-person pronoun, right? And in the second, what's "you"? What type of pronoun is that? Second person, yeah, right. (We're all posing after the wedding. [chuckles]) Second-person pronouns.

Which one is closer? Have you ever thought about that? The second is closer to what? To the first, right? And the first-person pronouns are the "I", "me", "my" pronouns, right? So, the second-person pronouns would be the "you" ones, and the third-person pronouns would be the "he", "she", "it", "they" ones, right?

Who cares? Well, let's look at the first stanza – that's the third person ones, the ones that are more distant, right? What is the feeling of the first stanza? How does it feel? Where are we? Green pastures, still waters, right paths, everything is okay. God is in the third person. What about the second stanza – where are we now? The darkest valley, in the presence of my enemies. God is in the second person.

What this brilliant seminary – he wasn't even just a professor, he was the dean of the seminary, the founding dean of the seminary – said to us all that night is, *Psalms 23 is the footprints in the sand poem*. [chuckles] And we were all like, *Whoa!* [aside to a former classmate] You were there; you remember that, right? [laughter]

God is with us at all times, but God – he, they, she – can keep some distance when things are like, you know, going fine, when we're in the green pastures and still waters. It's when the valley gets dark and the enemy is drawn near that God becomes *you*.

I'm tempted to say more, but I also suspect that each one of you might take a little bit of a different meaning from what we've just looked at, and I'd like to let you have it. So, let's pray.

## 2021-07-18 Sheep and Shepherds

Thank you, Lord, for these inspiring and provocative texts from the Bible. We pray that as we've looked at them and thought about them together, your Spirit has been among us, that you'll continue to speak to us through these texts, even after we leave this place. And those of us who are at peace, trust that you are close enough for your watchful eye to continue to care for us and look over us. And for those of us who are in strife, who are at risk, who are in dark valleys, make your presence known, we pray. Be a second-person pronoun kind of God, someone who's just one prayer away, and bring comfort and protection. We pray through Christ, our Lord, the Good Shepherd. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).