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Mark 8:34–36. New Living Translation

³⁴ Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. ³⁵ If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. ³⁶ And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?

Psalms 23:1–4. English Standard Version

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.*

³ *He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.*

⁴ *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

We shall not want.

My mother was a smoker. A true chain smoker, lighting the next cigarette with the butt of the one before. My father was a smoker, too, but he at least was careful about putting his cigarettes out. My mother, on the other hand,

sometimes abandoned her cigarettes. It probably had a lot to do with the fact that she also had a serious problem with alcohol. She would leave a cigarette on the edge of an ashtray – her favorite ashtrays were abalone shells – and it would burn a little bit, become unbalanced, and fall backward onto a piece of furniture. A ritual that we went through every time the family pulled away from the house was that my father would drive about a half block and then say, “Toni” – my mother’s name was Annette – “did you put out your cigarette?” To which my mother would answer, “I’m not sure.” Then my father would make a U-turn and go back to the house.

One day, after we returned to the house, and after my father went into the house to find my mother’s cigarette, he dashed back into the driveway and motioned for my older brother to get out of the car and come into the house. Now, I have to admit, I’m a bit fuzzy on exactly who helped my father. It might have been a neighbor whom my dad called into the house, not my brother. But in any case, a few moments later, my father and this other person carried the living room sofa out of the house. It was smoldering, with a thick, gray plume of smoke rising from it. After the sofa was put down in the driveway, or perhaps on the front lawn, my father turned the hose on it. Soon, the danger was over.

I have often attributed my fear of house fires on my mother's habit of almost starting fires. I'm one of those guys who worries about turning the stove off and not leaving electrical devices running. I never let any of the kids, when they young, have candles. It took on near-paranoia scale with me. Just ask Wendy how many times, when we were in the process of leaving the house, I've asked if this is off, or that is out, or if anyone left anything running. I even worry about notebook computer and phone batteries. You never know when a lithium battery might be bad and lead to a fire.

One eerie thing happened to me when I was twenty-two. I had just finished college and was working in San Francisco as a programmer. My company paid to send my belongings from L.A. to San Francisco in a moving van. My stuff was picked up at my parents' house in southern California. Now, I didn't own much, and my belongings were put into a van that already had someone's houseful of furniture in it. My father, to surprise me, added a few pieces of furniture that my parents owned, so that I would have something to get started with. When the moving guys unloaded the truck at my apartment in San Francisco, they pulled out a double bed that I recognized as having belonged to my parents when I was little. It was bought just after World War II and was made out of blond wood - very elegant, with a headboard that had cubbies with sliding

doors. When I was setting it up in my bedroom, I noticed that the top of it was covered with cigarette burns. I stood there staring at it. Wow. All those house fires that almost happened.

I'd like to talk about our first Bible quote today. *But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it.* ³⁶ *And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?* Before saying this, Jesus calls a crowd to gather. He's giving a lesson on what it means to be a disciple of Christ. This passage also anticipates the persecution that the Apostles will face after he is gone, as they go about building the church. Some of them will die because of their missionary efforts. But there is a more general point. As we strive to achieve things in life, to collect wealth and belongings, we can lose sight of something far more important – our souls. What Jesus is teaching us here is that even our very lives do not have the same value as our souls.

I have found myself being overly concerned with physical things, with protecting them, worrying about them, doing whatever I had to do to make sure I didn't lose them. Wendy and I recently had our house resided with a material that is essentially a cement product. When the cedar wood shingles on our house were ripped off and replaced with something that could not burn, I felt a great sense of relief. Our stuff was safe!

But yes, my house and everything in it is nothing compared to my eternal life. Sure, I could argue that I was protecting my family, too. The truth, though, is that I am as guilty as the next person when it comes to being overly focused on human life and the worldly possessions that come with it.

What about our second quote? It's one of the most famous quotes from the Bible. At a minimum, it's the most famous Psalm. We associate it with funerals and memorial services. There's more to this Psalm though, than having no fear as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, something that seems fitting when saying goodbye to a loved one. The Psalm begins with comparing God to a shepherd. To fully appreciate that, we need to note that in the ancient world, good kings, ones who truly cared about their people, were known as the shepherds of their people. Thus, if we call the Lord our shepherd, we are saying that we are committed to living under God's reign. But unlike earthly kings, God will never fail to give us what we truly need. So, what the Psalm says is that if we accept God as our shepherd, if we agree that God is our king, we don't have to worry about needing anything.

This promise from God is very specific. Because it evokes beautiful images of pastoral life, Psalm 23 communicates a sense of peace and tranquility, and we usually don't go any deeper into it. But the Psalm's promise of comfort doesn't

consist simply of vague imagery. Indeed, for sheep – and remember the Psalm is about a shepherd and his sheep – being able to lie down in green pastures means to have food. To be beside still waters means to have enough to drink. To be in the right path means that danger is avoided. Importantly, it is the shepherd that ensures all of this. It is God who provides for us, on this earth and for eternity.

Still, it can be hard to rely on this when we live in a consumer-oriented society. We – and I'll just say I – worry about my stuff. I don't want to wait for death for things to be okay. I want to be succeeding right here and now. But we need to keep in mind that the message of Psalm 23 isn't just that everything will be okay when we die. The message of this Psalm is that God is the only absolute necessity in this life right now – and in the next life, of course.

In fact, here is how Psalm 23 ends:

Surely, goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

So, there, you have it. Safe, now and forever.

To sum up Psalm 23: We've talked about the Psalms in a previous sermon, and we looked at a Psalm that was a lament. This Psalm isn't a lament. This is one of several Psalms that simply express confidence in God. It wasn't even used broadly in funerals until the twentieth century. But, because it is used so heavily

in funerals in TV shows and movies, we tend to associate it with death, rather than what it was originally intended for: as a celebration of a glorious duality: an earthly life *devoted to* God and an eternal life *spent with* God.

But there is something else in Psalm 23 that people often neglect. When this Psalm was written, and later, during the life of Jesus, being a shepherd was the lowest of low jobs. If a family needed a shepherd, the youngest son got stuck with the job. He had to live with the animals, sleeping out in the fields, and he had to protect the sheep, feeding them, making sure the young ones didn't freeze. Back then, sheep were not fenced in and protected. They wandered free. They were in grave danger all the time from predators. The shepherd had to deal with illnesses and injuries with the sheep. The shepherd was caregiver and bodyguard and veterinarian 24/7. Even more, the survival of a family could depend on the survival of the sheep. The shepherd would take on a wild animal or a violent thief, if necessary, to protect the sheep. Who would want to be a shepherd?

Well, interestingly, God is willing to be our shepherd. God is a good king, one who indeed holds our physical, emotional, and spiritual safety in high regard. Jesus compared himself to a shepherd. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for his sheep.*"

Now, after my father died, my sister and I moved our mother to Boulder. She was suffering from a dementia caused by alcohol abuse, so she needed a lot of help. Interestingly, once we got her into an assisted living facility, she stopped drinking. Completely. I believe that there was nothing left in her mind for her to suppress with alcohol, since her mind was largely destroyed.

One day I got a phone call saying that she was at Boulder Community hospital. She had an aneurysm, or a weakened bulge, in her aorta, the major blood vessel that supplies oxygen-filled blood to the body. It had burst, causing her to hemorrhage internally. Since she was living in a building that kept a close eye on its residents, she made it to the hospital while still alive – although she never regained consciousness.

A surgeon did her best to repair the damage, but my mother had very advanced heart disease. She began to bleed internally in other places. Eventually, when it was clear that she had no brain activity, my sister and I had them turn things off - and we let her go.

After the ventilator was removed, my mother's brain stem kept her breathing for a few more minutes. My sister and I stood there, holding her hands, watching, listening. Then, there were no more breaths. It struck me that my mother was taking nothing with her into the next life. She had had a tough life.

Her parents had deposited her and her two sisters in a convent school run by French speaking nuns who were at times brutal with the girls. She had married relatively young, worked in a gas mask factory during World War II, cared for my father when he came back from the Pacific badly wounded, and then spent the rest of her life raising three kids and teaching third grade. Her alcoholism was a disease and not her fault. She dearly loved her children.

My mother was a good shepherd. She deserved green pastures and still waters. And for an eternity of this, there was no need to bring anything with her. She didn't need any furniture in Heaven. And to get in, there was no fee to pay, no ticket to punch.

Wendy and I eventually donated that double bed to Family Services. I wondered what the next owners thought of those cigarette burns. The memory of them still makes me nervous, even though I know that with God as my shepherd, I shall not want. And with God as our shepherd, none of us will ever want, in this life or the next.