

Airplane Mode: Silencing the Noise to Amplify God  
The Noise of Fear (Psalm 23; Lent 4A hn 4:5-42; Lent 3A)

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-noise-of-fear/>

Well, brace yourselves, friends. The young people sitting here in front of us today, Generation Z, were all born between 2004 and 2011, maybe 2012. No longer can some of us say, "That is the year I graduated high school or college." Some of you can say, "That is the year I retired from a lifelong career!"

Because of this slight age gap among us, there are a few things us adults may know or be familiar with that our Gen Z friends have never experienced and may not even know about.

- Rotary Phones. Or the satisfaction of slamming down the receiver on a landline telephone.
- Be Kind, Please Rewind
- Dial Up Internet (AOL). Having to get off line so you mom could make a phone call.
- Research before the internet via World Books and Card Catalogues
- TV going off the air at night (online viewers stay with us)

If you asked one of these fine young adults to dial someone up or be kind and rewind, they might be confused. And if these fine young adults asked you if you stan Jesus or own a NFT, many of you might be confused.

There are a few things we don't have in common, but we have more in common than we think, and at least two of those things we're going to talk about today. The first is that most of us know very little about sheep, yet the Bible talks about them alot. Sheep are mentioned more than 500 times in the Bible, yet many of us couldn't name five things about sheep. So when parts of our Bible, like our psalm today, talk about sheep, the original audience of these poems and teachings would have understood all the rich and layered meanings, but today, we may be confused because most of us have zero experience with sheep. So, we're going to learn a couple of things today about sheep.

The second thing we all have in common, regardless of what generation we are a part of, is experience with fear and anxiety. Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. Everyone feels some level of nervousness to situations in their lives at different times. Anxiety disorders, however, are characterized by a persistent, excessive fear or anxiety that affects a person's ability to function. According to research, 1 in 4 men and 4 in 10 women will develop an anxiety disorder at some point during their lifetime,<sup>i</sup> and nearly 1 in 3 teens will experience an anxiety disorder.

Rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide among adolescents have risen sharply in recent years.<sup>ii</sup> And, I imagine, adults as well.

So, whether you are Gen Z, Gen WW2, or anywhere in between, many of us struggle with the noise of fear and anxiety. We hear it on the news, we see it on social media, and we feel it in our own hearts and minds. It can be difficult to hear anything else over the noise of fear. It can be loud, constantly on replay, and preventing us from hearing the words of peace, hope, and truth spoken to us by God. But, oh, how we need to hear those words.

So, let's talk about both this morning. Beginning with sheep.

When you hear "sheep," some of you may picture this guy, Shaun the Sheep. The peace of the valley often turned to mayhem in the meadow with Shaun usually at the center of it. There are a few Shauns in this youth group, I know.

Way before Shaun the sheep, there have always been sheep and lambs, which are just baby sheep. Sheep are some of the most successfully domesticated animals in the world. They have been part of human society for thousands of years with humans depending on them for wool, meat, and milk. In Biblical times, sheep were abundant and nearly everyone would have understood metaphors related to sheep which is why they were often used as metaphors by Biblical poets and writers when discussing the relationship between humans and God.

But for us today, Psalm 23 should fall on our ears like a foreign phrase or words from a generation gone by. Yet, it doesn't. It still manages to speak to us today even when we know very little about pastoral or rural living. "Psalm 23 is one of the most familiar passages of scriptures known throughout the world. In the music world, rapper Tupac Shakur referenced the psalm in his song, "So Many Tears," and the artist Kanye West refers to the "valley of the shadow of death" in his well-known song, "Jesus Walks." In James Cameron's epic movie, *Titanic*, a priest recites Psalm 23 while the great ship is sinking. After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, President George Bush read the famous words from the psalmist when he addressed a nation in shock and mourning."<sup>iii</sup>

I, and more than one pastor, have recited the words of Psalm 23 at deathbeds and funerals. It is often requested by families for funerals even if they do not have much to do with church or faith. But this song of trust is for so much more than funerals. It is a song to lead us through all of life's journeys, not just the final one.

One of the important things to know about sheep is that they are among the world's most stress-prone animals, often in need of reassurance and encouragement. It is why we sometimes refer to fearful or timid people as being "sheepish." They are nervous and easily startled and overwhelmed.

Sheep, like us, tend to wander, getting lost or drifting into harmful situations or places. And if a sheep that is heavily pregnant, overweight, or has a heavy coat of wool, gets on its back, they can't get back up without help. Yes, I know ... some of us can relate.

When this happens to a sheep, they are said to be "cast," a sheep that has tipped over and cannot get back up. They can become super distressed and can actually die within a short period of time, if they are not rolled back into a normal position. When back on their feet, they may need support for a few minutes to ensure they are steady. The shepherd watches for this, and when he sees a sheep on its back, will gently pick them up, hold them until they calm down, and set them right.

This is what the Hebrew word for "restores" means in Psalm 23.3 when it says, "he restores my soul." It is referring to the act of a shepherd setting the sheep back up after its fallen over. God is continually restoring us, setting us back upright after we have fallen or been knocked over by hard things in life, embracing us, calming us, and setting us right once again. He restores us.

We may not have much experience with sheep, but we all understand the need to be restored. We understand what it is like to be in distress, to feel knocked down by life, flat on our back and unable to get our footing again. Even when we don't want to admit it or ask for help, we recognize a longing deep within for someone bigger, wiser, and stronger to take care of us. We need someone who can restore our troubled souls because the world and all it offers can't do it for us. Only the Shepherd can set us right again. What a beautiful image to hold on to in those moments when we feel we are floundering and unable to gain our footing, when the noise of fear is all we hear.

Psalm 23 is a song that invites us to silence the noise of fear with the truth of God's presence, provision, and protection. And not just on our deathbeds but throughout all of life's journey. From good times to bad ones, from mountain tops to the darkest valleys, the one thing that will see us through is the presence, provision, and protection of the Shepherd. The major claim of Psalm 23 is this: God, our Shepherd, provides for our lives so we may live without any need and without any fear. A sheep trusts the shepherd to lead and provide for them. Sheep trust the shepherd to be present, to provide, and to protect.

I've read that unlike cattle who like to be driven from behind, sheep prefer to be led. Sheep apparently have an uncanny ability to form a trusting relationship with their shepherds. If you were to travel to rural areas of the Middle East today, you may see three or four shepherds all arrive at a watering hole around sundown, all the sheep mixing together into one big flock to drink from the still waters. But the shepherds don't worry about this mash up of sheep, because each shepherd knows that when it's time to go, all he has to do is give his own distinctive whistle, call, or play his shepherd's flute in his own unique fashion, and all of his sheep will separate themselves from the mixed-up herd to follow the shepherd they've come to trust.<sup>iv</sup>

Jesus said in John 10:14, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me."

What helps the sheep in moments of distress or fear? Listening for and to the shepherd who knows them and who they know. What helps us in moments of distress or fear? Listening for and to the Shepherd who knows us and whom we know.

Psalm 23 doesn't say "if" I walk through the darkest valley. It says, "when." Psalm 23 doesn't say the presence of my "possible" enemies. It says, "the presence of my enemies." These are the realities of life. You will have dark valleys. You will have enemies. When the noise of fear is loud, Psalm 23 reminds us that there is something else to listen for: the voice of our Shepherd. When the noise of fear is loud, it can be difficult to hear God's voice unless we already know and trust our Shepherd's distinct voice. That's why we need to cultivate a habit of listening for God's voice in times of peace, so that we can recognize it when we need it most.

Pastor Derek Vreeland wrote, "I cannot expect to follow God's lead through the chaos and noise if I don't cultivate an awareness of God in the stillness and quiet."

Before Psalm 23 ever gets to the darkest valley or table in the presence of enemies, it begins with abiding in the every day. Be present with the shepherd in green pastures and waters of rest. Be present with the shepherd as we walk together right paths. Be present in perfect trust, believing there is nothing we lack because God is with us. This daily abiding with the Shepherd is what allows the psalmist to sing this song of trust when the valleys get dark and when the enemies show up, and it will allow us to do the same.

There have been moments in my life where I've been overwhelmed by fear and anxiety. Your heart starts to race. Your mind runs wild. Your breathing becomes shallow. You feel like hope seems lost and the worst thing you can imagine is now possible or has happened. And after exhausting all efforts to find a way out of it or around it on our own, we, too, become exhausted, flat on our back, and in distress. And in that moment when the noise of fear and anxiety is raging, I close my eyes and listen again for the voice of the One I trust and know, the One who says even though I walk through a difficult and dark time, I do not need to fear because the Lord is with me. God is good. God is trustworthy. I lack nothing because God is my shepherd.

One of the things that helps me silence the noise of fear to amplify God is a centering or breath prayer. This is one of many spiritual rhythms or practices available to us to help silence the noise and amplify God. Those of you participating in our Lent small groups are learning others as well.

A lot of work has been done on the power of breath work to manage stress. The same science that helps athletes and individuals transform their stress also stands behind the ancient spiritual practice of Breath Prayer. The simplicity of a breath prayer helps us to stop striving, silence the noise, relax our bodies, and create space to be present with God, whenever and wherever. I want to lead us in practicing this for a few moments as we conclude today. I don't want to spend all of our time talking about our Shepherd. I want to create space for you to sit with our Shepherd, to hear and experience God.

Quiet yourself. Maybe place both feet on the floor, sit up straight, so you can breathe deeply, and even consider opening up your hands in front of you or on your legs, palm up. This tells your body and your mind you are ready to receive. Take a few deep breathes.

### **Breath or Centering Prayer Activity**

INHALE

The Lord is my Shepherd

I will not fear

Goodness and mercy

I will dwell

EXHALE

I shall not want

For You are with me

Shall follow (or pursue) me

In the house of the Lord forever

There are some among us, regardless of what generation you belong to, struggling with persistent fear and anxiety that interferes with your ability to function. Perhaps the next step you need to hear today is an nudge to see your doctor about help. Some may need the gift of counseling, therapy, and/or medication for this season or longer. There is no shame in this. I've used all three at different seasons in my life. It is not a lack of faith. It is evidence of a body designed by our Creator to alert us when we are in need of healing. It isn't only our bones that can break. Sometimes we need to help to set things right again so we can heal.

For all of us, I want you to listen to this truth above all the noise of fear: There is a Shepherd who loves you and is with you; a Shepherd who will pick you back up, steady you, and set you right again; a Shepherd who will walk the dark valley with you; a Shepherd who will prepare a feast for you and pursue you with goodness and mercy. You are not forsaken. You are not alone. The Lord is our Shepherd. We live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God. The kingdom is not in trouble and neither are we. Thanks be to God.

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/07/health/anxiety-mental-health-depression-screening-prevention-health-wellness/index.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/19/1144124269/the-teen-mental-health-crisis>

<sup>iii</sup> The Abingdon Preaching Manual. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022, 31.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.cepreaching.org/commentary/2023-03-13/psalm-23-13>