

Sermon – May 8, 2022
Pastor Dan Hollis
Psalm 23

When I was a Boy Scout, growing up in the state of Connecticut we didn't really have a lot in the way of *mountains* to climb for our Troop hikes. We had to do a certain amount of hikes of a certain length for rank advancement, with more on top of that if you were going for Hiking Merit Badge. But in Connecticut you don't have the wind-swept White Mountains of New Hampshire, and you certainly don't have anything like Mount A just down the road. For the most part, we just kinda had *woods* and a few big *hills*. So to make our Troop hikes *challenging* and worthwhile, our leaders had to pick some creative trails.

There was one hike I remember well that led eventually to what was almost a natural maze of rock formations. At first the trail would take you over the top of the rocky ridge, and you'd walk along it, hopping across small gaps beneath you, and you could get a sense of the shape of the area. From above, you could see where the trail would eventually *take* you. You'd see where it wound back, *through* the rocks you were first walking over *top* of. You could see and hear other hikers making their way through the tight twists and turns below you, but one of the twists you couldn't *quite* see as you made your way along... was the *main* attraction. Someone along the way had given it a *name*, which of course makes it *legendary* in the minds of every young Scout going on that hike for the first time, but they gave it the really unfortunate name of "Fat Man's Squeeze." I hope they've changed that name by now, partly because it's just kind of *rude*, and partly because of what that name *did* to us young, *new* Scouts when we first heard it.

See we spent the whole first half of the hike wondering, "Who's gonna get *stuck* in Fat Man's Squeeze?" Just the fact that it had a *name* like that had us *worried* as we got closer and closer that some of us might actually end up *wedged* in there between the rocks, and they'd have to cut our *leg* off or something like that to get us out.

It didn't help that the *older* Scouts who'd been through *before* were there to egg us on. And of *course* we had the kind of adult leaders who couldn't *help* fanning the flames themselves. "Oh yeah, we once had a kid who was a week away from getting his Eagle badge, but he got stuck in Fat Man's Squeeze for so long he missed his own ceremony. They had to send people from the Forest Service every day with packs of food and water so he wouldn't starve to death. Eventually we had to slather him in Crisco and push him out with our hiking boots. His head was never the same shape again..."

Now we were terrified... but the adult leaders were *fine* having a laugh about it, because they *knew* it was nowhere *near* that bad. When we finally got there beneath the shadows of the rocks above us, sure, it took some tricky maneuvering to slip through the

tight, weird-shaped little canyon in the rock, but we were kids, and for us “Fat Man’s Squeeze” ended up more of a *psychological* threat than an actual physical one.

Then the adults went through, and as they say, “pride goes before a fall.”

As one of our leaders was *mid*-sentence saying something like, “What were you so scared of, this is *nothing*,” he got his foot *firmly* wedged between the rocks.

So he’s stuck there—this mature adult role-model—a rock wall up against his face, a rock wall up against his back, and his ankle lodged at a truly uncomfortable angle.

And then... he started to panic. And it stopped being funny real fast.

If you’ve ever heard a grown man cry—I mean *really* cry—you can imagine that feeling of instant karma didn’t last very long for us. Because it’s not *fun* to be wedged in between the rocks miles from the highway with the sun starting to set. Justice or not, I wouldn’t wish a panic attack on anyone. I can’t even remember his name anymore, but I’ll never forget what his voice sounded like that day when he asked for *help*.

The point of this story is really to tell what happened *next*. Because it was in that moment that us, the young Scouts who had just gone *through* the Squeeze—not the older Scouts who were already a half-mile down the trail and hadn’t *realized* what had happened, and not the *other* adults who couldn’t get a good look at the situation from the back—it was *us* who were able to gather around, calm him down with words of comfort and encouragement, and then get down in there and eventually help wriggle his boot *free*... no Crisco required.

We may not have had much in the way of mountains in Connecticut, but we had few dark valleys here and there.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me.”

I think there are two elements that Bible passage we read from is trying to show us: things the Lord can do for *us* when we need it most, and an *example* for us to follow.

Psalms 23 reminds us that the Lord can be our shepherd.

A shepherd is a leader, a guide, a protector, a comforter, a maintainer.

A shepherd helps their sheep feel safe enough to lie down and rest, a shepherd finds the clearest stillest water to quench the sheep’s thirst, a shepherd leads the sheep on the right paths that will take them to where they need to be, where there’s food and security and a future. A shepherd uses their rod to fight off the wolves, and their curved staff to pull the sheep out of the thorny brambles it’s gotten itself stuck in.

We—all of us, it doesn’t matter what age we are, from baby to boomer and beyond—we all have those dark valley moments. Those moments where we’re stuck or lost or surrounded by enemies on all sides. We all have moments of panic... like a sheep separated from its flock, or a human wedged in a rocky crevice.

But the reason *I'm* here, the reason people go to churches or read from the Bible or *pray*... is because you don't have to face those moments alone. There is *no* valley too dark that the Good Shepherd can't find you. No karmic justice will stop God from being there for you if you call out for help. God *wants* to point you to the trails that will lead you safely through the hike. God wants to help you make this life easier on yourself. And God doesn't laugh at you 'cause you're a kid and you don't know any better.

God wants to stand by your side when the sun starts to set and the wolves start to howl.

I wish I really *knew* that when I was Scouting age, because I had my own dark valleys I had to go through. *Never* forget that you don't *ever* have to go through anything *alone*.

That's what Psalm 23 reminds us the Lord can do for *you*. But I think in reminding us what a Good Shepherd is, it *also* reminds us what *we* should be doing to be one *ourselves*.

My Scout leaders weren't *bad* leaders... but on *that* hike I told you about, they weren't being good shepherds. They weren't making the right kind of atmosphere a bunch of stressed-out flat-footed brand-new Scouts from Connecticut really *needed* to learn and grow. They weren't setting us up for success, and they weren't leading us to still waters.

But while they certainly didn't plan it, we found ourselves with the opportunity to *be* the good shepherds that were needed. When once sheep got stuck in a dark valley and panicked, we were able to do all the things Psalm 23 says a Good Shepherd should: we made sure he was safe, we calmed him, gave him peace instead of fear, stood with him in the face of danger and obstacle, and guided him to freedom.

We could do that because we had gone through the Squeeze before him. As a Christian church we believe that *Jesus* is *our* Good Shepherd, because he went through his *own* darkest valleys in his life, and knows what it takes to get out the other side.

And *you* too have been through things in *your* life that give *you* what it takes to be a good shepherd.

Whether it be as a friend, or a sibling, or a Scout leader, or a politician, or a boss, or a pastor, or—on a holiday like today, who could forget—a Mother... there are countless opportunities throughout all our lives to be a good shepherd for someone, just like Psalm 23 says the Lord is for us.

With God on your side, surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life.

Now ask yourself, *who* in *your* life can *you* offer that to in return? Amen.