

## **The Shepherd Who Gives Rest**

In my years of priesthood, I don't think I've ever preached on this psalm. But if there is a psalm to preach on, it would certainly be Psalm 23, which we heard in today's reading, as the most famous of probably all Old Testament passages: a beautiful passage talking about our relationship with the Lord, His tender care, and His shepherding us in the right direction.

But I'm going to get even more specific than that. I'm going to preach on one word—one word in Hebrew that we find today. And I want to retranslate the passage, because normally our official translation says, "In verdant pastures He gives me repose." You've heard that before, right? "In verdant pastures He gives me repose." But that translation kind of glosses over what is really being said there.

The proper literal translation is, "On the green grass, He makes me lie down." The phrase I'm going to focus on is not "the green grass," but "makes me lie down." My whole homily is going to be on this.

This phrase in Hebrew is very hard to translate. But again, as I said, "makes me lie down" is the closest. It's a term that is a very technical term in shepherding. It's not a term that's used in any other context. It's a technical term, "makes me lie down," used for shepherding.

As I looked at the term, I had to look up, "What does this mean?" It turns out that, in actual shepherding, to make a sheep lie down is not an easy thing. Sheep are skittish. Sheep are herd animals. They get scared very easily. They get agitated. They're very kind of fussy. For a shepherd to create the condition where a sheep is actually willing to lie down on its side in the grass, there are four things that generally have to happen. Those four things are all applicable to us also finding rest, and us finding rest in the Lord. These four things, I think, have direct corollaries to our spiritual life.

So I'm going to go over those four things that a shepherd does to make a sheep have conditions where it will actually lie down on the green grass.

### **Safety, Trust, and the End of Comparison**

The first thing, of course, is that the sheep have to feel safe. If throughout the day of shepherding there have been wolves that kind of got in between the sheep, or the sheep have gotten really shaken up, they're not actually going to lie down that night. They're going to sleep standing up because they're so jittery, and their nervous systems get so kind of jacked up from the adrenaline that they won't actually sleep.

So that's the first part. The sheep, having been protected all day, if it's been a good day, the shepherd will post up someplace where all the sheep can see him, because they know he's there and he's protecting them. And in that condition, they will actually lie down because they feel safe.

For us, dear friends in Christ, we're talking about trust. The sheep trust the shepherd because he's protected them. Where are you in terms of your relationship with trusting in God and His plans?

Jesus said in the Gospel today, "I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly." He came that you might have life and have it more abundantly.

I find that trust in the Lord is a very important part of the spiritual life, and it's hard-won by experience. It is to trust that God is always true to His promises. I find that most people who struggle with distrust or mistrust of the Lord have had, on some level, a negative experience in their life where they feel like God wasn't true to His promises to them.

When I explore that with people a little bit, it always turns out that folks are more or less upset, or mistrusting in the Lord, for not keeping a promise He never made. I'll say that again. Most people who struggle with distrust in the Lord, on some level, are upset that God didn't keep a promise He never made.

God is true to His promises, and He never promises us that we won't experience suffering and difficulty and really hard things, even trauma. What He promises us is that He's with us. In fact, in our second reading we heard, "By His wounds we are healed." It's through Christ's wounds and His suffering and death that He is both with us and can heal us. That's the promise.

So if distrust is an issue in your own relationship with the Lord, I invite you to explore that God is true to His promises. His promise is that He is with us, and that by His grace and our cooperation, by His wounds, we can be healed.

So that's the first part: trust and safety for them to lie down.

The second is something I didn't know. Within sheep there's a herd mentality, and within it there's a pecking order. What happens is a shepherd has to know the personalities of his sheep, and he has to kind of organize where they are in the herd. The reason being—you might be surprised—sheep bully each other. Sheep will bully the weaker sheep. They're very temperamental.

If the shepherd has done a good job of keeping the sheep where they're supposed to be and caring for each of them, when they get to where he wants them to lie down, the smaller

sheep aren't all disquieted by the bullying they've experienced. Essentially, they've had a pretty good run that day, and they're in a place where they're able to rest.

Now, this might be a little bit of a stretch in terms of our spiritual life, but it's worth a shot at it. What I'm getting at is the Lord's care for each of the sheep individually, and not for the pecking order. He doesn't love the strong ones more than the weak ones. He probably loves the weak ones a little bit better than the strong ones who are bullies, right?

The point for us is that one thing that robs us of rest is comparison, rivalry, and resentment. I'll say that again. A thing that very much robs us of rest in the Lord is comparison, rivalry, and resentment.

What this takes is that we realize that, as the shepherd loves his sheep and organizes them where they're supposed to be, Jesus loves you uniquely and organizes you within the Body of Christ where you're supposed to be. His love is enough for you. And because His love is enough for you, you don't have to strive or get ahead of your neighbor. You don't have to compare your gifts to someone else's gift, or your life to someone else's life, because God's love defines you. Nothing else. If we live into that, we will experience rest in our heart.

### **Ticks, Flies, Hunger, and Prayer**

The third thing that keeps sheep from lying down is ticks and flies. I'm not kidding. A good shepherd knows about ticks and flies, because obviously, if you have a bunch of ticks on your side, you're not going to lie on it. It's not comfortable. And if you're in an area where there are a bunch of flies around, the sheep will sit there and kind of stomp and shake. They won't lie down. They'll stand up and stomp and shake to keep the flies from getting on them. They won't lie down if they have a bunch of ticks on the side.

So the shepherd actually takes care of the ticks. It's part of his job. And often, if he has to shave down a little bit to get the tick out, he'll put oil over it as a salve.

"My head anointed with oil. My cup overflows." That puts a new spin on that line, doesn't it?

What is this for us? This one's really important, and people really struggle with this. It's the anxieties and nagging thoughts that we allow to just ruminate. It's our anxieties and nagging thoughts that we ruminate on. Most people carry anxieties because they think they are theirs to carry.

These are the ticks and flies. You know, you can give those to the Lord. If you care about it, if it makes you anxious, the Lord Jesus cares about it, and He wants you to entrust it to Him.

A lot of people think, "Well, you've got the war in Iran, you've got famine in places in Africa. There's no way the Lord has time to care about XYZ." That is theologically incorrect. Period.

So with our anxieties, our nagging thoughts: the Shepherd cares about those ticks and flies. Allow Him to take them out and to get you to a place of rest.

Fourth, and finally, hunger. If a sheep is still hungry, it will keep grazing, even if it's almost half-asleep as it's grazing. If it's still hungry, it won't lie down because it will keep grazing.

The hunger of our heart is for the Lord. St. Augustine famously said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." Until our hunger is properly satisfied, we won't rest. We'll be restless, literally.

So the challenge here is: are we sufficiently feeding on the Lord in a way that will actually satisfy our heart? By this, I mean spending sufficient time with Him.

I'll often have a conversation with an adult—either young adult or older adult, or sometimes a teenager—and they'll say to me something like, "Father, when I was ten, I felt a really strong connection with the Lord, and I don't feel that anymore." I'll kind of examine a few things with them, but what almost always turns out in that case is that their prayer practice at twenty-five, thirty-five, or forty-five is essentially the same as it was when they were ten.

A ten-year-old needs a lot less food than a twenty-five-year-old generally. Let's say a nine-year-old. Some ten-year-olds can eat like monsters. So, if our prayer practice is basically the same as it was when we were ten, that won't fill a forty-five-year-old. If your prayer practice and devotion on a daily basis is the same, you actually won't feel hungry because you are starving. You won't feel hungry because you are starving.

Sometimes it's as simple as Confession. Sometimes a person actually is cut off from the Lord, in a sense, and so a good Confession can sometimes renew that sense of connection. But generally, in prayer practice, we have to give the Lord sufficient time.

St. Alphonsus Liguori is quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church as saying, "Those who pray are certainly saved; those who do not pray are certainly damned." It's a gloss, right? That's not an absolute, but it really gets to the fact that we have to have a daily practice of prayer.

So if you are looking at your prayer life and you're like, "Yeah, I need to put some work in," work at it this Easter season. Give the Lord a bit more time. And as we give the Lord more of our time and our heart, we will find rest. I promise you.

So dear friends in Christ, as we come to this Eucharist, let us give the Lord Jesus our trust. Let us give Him our anxieties. Let us have confidence that His love is enough for us. And let us hunger only for Him. Praise be Jesus Christ.