

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,*

³ *he restores my soul.*

*He guides 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.*

⁵ *You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.*

*You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

⁶ *Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever. (Psalm 23)*

The Lord is Your Shepherd

This year is the 40th anniversary of my confirmation. Today isn't the exact date, but forty years ago I stood in the front of my church and made the confession and the promises that you confirmands are about to make. That's been on my mind all year as we've gone through catechism class together. Now, my confirmation was in a much smaller church than this one and I only had five kids in my class. And my pastor didn't even make us go through public examination like you guys did yesterday. That was the first time he had ever done that. But on that day in 1977, many things were the same for me as they are for you today. Like you, I didn't know what my future would hold. I didn't know that someday I would be a pastor. I didn't know what high school and college would be like. I couldn't see the four years that I would spend in the army or the four years I would spend at the seminary or the five years I would spend as a world missionary in Colombia. There was no way for me to know for sure that I would ever get married or have children. Like you, I thought about that future that was coming. I even daydreamed about my future job and my future family. But even when I imagined things that actually happened, I couldn't make myself feel what it's really like to be married or to be a parent or to be a pastor.

But God always knew what was coming. That's still true. Is today my last day on this earth or will I live to be 120? Only God knows. As King David taught us, he is my shepherd through it all. And not just mine. Today is your confirmation day. So much lies ahead for you. There's no way for us to know how long you will live, how hard or how easy your life is going to be, how close or how far away from here you're going to wind up. There is only one person who can know: **the Lord is your Shepherd!**

I.

He will care for you in this life. What do shepherds do? You don't see too many shepherds in Livonia or Westland, but I think we understand the point. Shepherds care for their sheep. King David wrote, "**He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.**" He says, "**I shall not be in want.**" King David was a shepherd when he was a boy and he was thinking about his job then. He took the sheep out to pastures where they could eat and drink and have all that a sheep would want. Why did the shepherd do that? He valued the sheep. The truth is, those sheep were his livelihood. The wool they provided would keep his family warm and when he sold it, that wool would provide everything else they needed. So he was highly

motivated to care for those sheep. That's the picture God uses for his care for you. Of course, Jesus applies all this directly to himself when he says, **"I am the Good Shepherd."** Jesus cares for us, his sheep.

The point is not that we are Jesus' livelihood. He doesn't get anything from caring for us. The point is the deep commitment that the shepherd has for his sheep. His life revolves around those sheep. Jesus took on human flesh for us. His life on this earth was all about us. And even now, his commitment to us is every bit as deep. He is highly motivated to care for us. So he makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside quiet waters. He gives us all that we need and more. Think, my young friends, of how much God has given you. Think of your homes and your parents' cars. Think of the clothes God gives you and your phones and your video games. Think of those parents who work long hours not just to feed you but to shower you with love and affection. It's true that some of you have bigger houses and nicer phones than others. But not one of you ever goes to bed hungry because your parents can't feed you. You don't shiver through the night because they can't afford to heat the house. The truth is, all of you have more than just the basics to stay alive. God loves you and makes your cup overflow with blessings.

That's true even when life doesn't seem to be going that well. King David said, **"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."** Notice, he didn't say we wouldn't have enemies. He didn't say God would just get rid of our enemies. He said that the enemies won't be able to stop God's blessings. But that doesn't mean they won't try. We do have to face all the enemies of this life and the great enemy, the Devil.

King David said, **"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."** I use this psalm a lot when I visit people in the hospital because in the hospital you really feel like you're in the valley of the shadow of death. You realize just how easy it would be for our lives to end. Maybe when you're twelve or thirteen that seems less real to you, but Jesus is promising that he will be with you no matter how hard it gets here. He's promising to use his rod and his staff to beat off the wolves and to protect you from all harm and danger. No matter how much the devil wants to destroy you, no matter how many people mock your faith in high school or college, no matter what persecutions or health problems you face in the course of your life, Jesus will be with you through it all. He will strengthen you to endure it. He will hear your prayers and rescue you and heal you. He will use those pains that you have to face to purify your faith and bring you home to heaven. That is his promise to you today.

While we are here on this earth, King David reminds us, **"He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."** What does that mean? He's talking about living a Christian life. Like everyone else here who was ever confirmed, you confirmands are going to promise today that you will conform all your life to the teachings of God's Word. You're going to promise God that you will be faithful in coming to church for as long as you live. You're going to swear that you will show your faith when you make choices about what you're going to do with your friends. You will promise to avoid sin day in and day out for as long as you live.

King David understood three thousand years ago that you and I can't keep that promise on our own. We need Jesus to guide us in those paths. Yes, that means showing us what the right path is. He has to tell us what things God wants us to do and not do. But it means more than that. He has to give us the desire to live that way. He has to give us the power to live that way. And the promise he makes to you today – before you stand up here and make your promises – is that he will do that through the gospel. Every time you hear that Jesus is your Savior, every time you hear that you are forgiven, every time you remember your baptism and come to communion, Jesus will work in your heart to guide you in the paths of righteousness. Trust that promise and make your promises today.

II.

When I was in the army, I had some very good friends that I used to go to church with. Back in our day, it was traditional to give a confirmand a hymnal for their confirmation. Usually, you would have their name and their confirmation date engraved on that hymnal in gold letters. Then you were supposed to bring that hymnal to church and use it. Well, I was sitting with this couple in church one Sunday and the wife was holding her hymnal. And I noticed that she was confirmed before I was born. And, of course, I had to point that out to her. I remind her of it almost every time I see her. While we joke about it, she is a faithful believer who made her confession and her promises more than fifty years ago. The Lord is still her shepherd. He's not done taking care of her. I hope and pray she has many more years with us here, but in addition all the blessings he has given her and is still going to give her here, there is one final thing the Good Shepherd will do for her: he

will bring her home. That's true for me and it's true for every believer who has gathered here to witness your confirmation today. And it is absolutely true for you. **The Lord is your shepherd. He will bring you home.**

That's what a shepherd does at the end of every day. He brings the sheep home. So King David wrote about green pastures and quiet waters and passing through the valley of the shadow of death. But in the end he said, **"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."** What is the house of the Lord? We've told you many times that this is God's house. Every church is. For King David, the tabernacle was God's house and he planned to replace it with a temple, which his son Solomon built. But what does it mean that David planned to live there? You know he didn't do that. He built a palace for himself and he lived there.

You could think of it in different ways. We dwell in the house of the Lord when we're here so frequently that it feels like home. In a greater sense, we dwell in God's house when we trust in our Savior and that faith dominates our lives. But finally, all of that is really a foretaste of dwelling in God's house in heaven. The Bible pictures the saints gathered around the throne of God, living in his real temple in heaven, serving him day and night, safe from all harm and danger, and God has wiped every tear from our eyes. In the end, the Good Shepherd will lead us out of this life and home to the next. As much as you're looking forward to high school and then college, as much as there is a whole life ahead of you which I pray will include spouses and children and good jobs and nice homes, your real future lies beyond all that. All those things are still here in this life, in the valley of the shadow of death where everything finally dies. But you will go home to be with Jesus and live with him forever. That is more important than all your future here.

Why will you get there? Because of what that Good Shepherd did for you. In our gospel lesson, we heard Jesus build on this psalm. In the verse right after our gospel lesson, Jesus said, **"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."** That's what you will confess in a few minutes. Jesus has laid down his life for you and me. Why did he do that? Because we sheep are sinners. I've been a pastor now for 24 years. I've have confirmed hundreds of 8th graders in that time. But too many of them have disappeared within a year of making their promise. Why? Were they worse sinners than I am? Were they worse sinners than you are? No. We're all totally guilty. Our sinful hearts don't want to make the promise you will make today and they definitely don't want to keep it. They don't have a problem coming up with reasons to forget it. For the rest of your life, you will have to fight a battle to be here. You will have to fight a battle to live as you will promise to live today. The devil and your own sinful heart and the world around us will work every day to keep you from living as Jesus calls you to. They will win some days. That sin deserves punishment in hell. That unbeliever that lives inside you should drag you all the way down to hell for all eternity.

But the Good Shepherd laid down his life for you and for me, his sheep. His blood has washed all that sin away. We are forgiven. God refuses to even see our sin anymore. Jesus rose to tell us that we will rise and live with him forever. Jesus works in our hearts to conquer that sin. He leads us in the paths of righteousness. That is your Good Shepherd. That is who you are about to confess. That is who you are promising to follow. And the beauty is, all the power to keep that promise comes from him. Your job is to hook up to that power. Plug your faith in to Jesus by hearing his word and taking communion and then with his power, conform all your life to his teaching. So make your confession and make your promise now. And keep it, with Jesus' help. Amen.