

Preacher: Lester Boleyn, presenting sermon by Pastor Tim

Scripture: Psalm 23

It sounds as if this sermon title could be another one of the 10 commandments, or maybe one of Jesus' modifications to the laws in his Sermon on the Mount. "Thou shall not want." Or maybe, "You have heard it said, 'thou shall not covet,' but I say to you 'thou shall not want.'" But this little phrase doesn't come from Jesus or Moses. No, it is nestled in one of the most beloved scriptures in all the faith. A scripture that so many of you, especially in older generations, have memorized. A scripture that I am asked to read at 90% of the funerals I have performed. Psalm 23 is a psalm attributed to King David, a song of the tender accompaniment of God through hardship, danger, hurt, and loss. The image of God as the good Shepherd shines through so much so that the psalmist can proclaim a profound truth, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." A simple argument, "If I have the Lord guiding me, I need nor want anything more."

How often can we bring ourselves to make such a statement? Rarely, I think. The reality is, we read Psalm 23 so frequently at funerals because often it is only in the pits and valleys of our lives that we realize that the Lord is what we truly need. And while we do not wish to always live in those valleys of loss, these pits of despair, sometimes we see things from a different perspective when we're down there.

Who, upon losing a loved one, rushes out to buy the new iPhone? Not many. Who, when their enemies are coming at them from all sides, sits down to enjoy a most expensive meal? Not many. Who, upon learning of a terminal illness, thinks they can find solace in HBO? The people who do these things do not know the steadfast love of the Lord. But too often, when someone finds themselves in such a pit and their deepest needs are not being met by creature comforts, that is when people discover their deeper spiritual self. The Lord becomes their shepherd, and they shall not want.

But, my desire as a pastor is to shepherd a flock into reciting this simple phrase not only when times are tough, but all the time. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." If we can say this phrase not only when we are in the pit and needing comfort, but when things are well and we are pursuing joy, then we can be a people of God. But too often when things are well, we get confused about what makes us happy.

Homiletics online magazine relays this story from Pastor John Ortberg of Willow Creek Church outside Chicago.

"He and his wife have three small children. As you might guess, when they go out to eat, there is only one place they ever want to go, and it is 'the shrine of the golden arches.' He said his children seem to be convinced that they have a McDonald's-shaped vacuum in their souls. He said the kids always want the same thing. It's a combination of the food—about which they really don't much care—and a little prize. It's not much of a prize, really, just some cheap little plastic thing; but in a moment of marketing genius, the folks at McDonald's gave it a particular name. They call it the Happy Meal. It is 'the meal of great joy.' You aren't just buying chicken McNuggets and a tiny plastic Hercules ring, you're buying happiness.

"He says that every now and then he tries to talk them out of it. He tells them to order whatever they want, and he will give them a quarter so they can buy their own trinket; and everyone will come out ahead. But the chant goes up, 'We want a Happy Meal. We want a Happy Meal.' Other customers stare at the skinflint of a father who won't buy his kids the meal of great joy.

“So, he buys them the Happy Meal. And it makes them happy, he says, for about a minute and a half. The problem is that the happy wears off. The contentment doesn't last. He says that you never hear of a young adult coming back to his parents and saying, ‘Gee, Dad, remember that Happy Meal you gave me? That's where I found lasting contentment and lifelong joy. I knew if I could just have that Happy Meal, I would be content for a lifetime, and I am. Thank you. There'll be no need for therapy for this boy.’ In fact, the only one that Happy Meals bring real happiness to is McDonald's.”

Ortberg continues to explain, “You would think, kids being fairly bright these days, that sooner or later they would catch on to this deal and say, ‘You know, I keep getting these Happy Meals and they don't give me lasting happiness, so I'm not going to be a sucker any more. I'm not going to set myself up for frustration and disappointment anymore.’ But it never happens. They keep buying Happy Meals and they keep not working.

“Of course, only a child would be so foolish. Only a kid would be so naive as to think that contentment could be acquired through some kind of external acquisition. Only someone very young would have a high enough stupid quotient to believe that lasting happiness could come by a change in external circumstances. Right?”

“The truth about human beings is that as we grow up, we don't get any smarter; our Happy Meals just keep getting more expensive. But the world around us tells us that happiness is always just one Happy Meal away.”¹

So, folks, what's your more expensive Happy Meal? What's that indulgence that brings you just enough happiness to keep you coming back, but not enough to fulfill you? What's that pleasure that distracts you from the Shepherd when times are good?

In religions of the Far East like Hinduism and Buddhism, there is a strong teaching that spiritual enlightenment comes with learning detachment. You must detach yourself from earthly desires, and only then will you realize important spiritual truth. Spiritual disciplines for these believers include meditation and yoga for the purposes of clearing the mind, releasing desires, emptying oneself to be filled spiritually.

In the Christian faith, we are challenged in similar ways to let go of frivolous desires because they have a tendency to control us. So, we may embark on a similar emptying journey in order that we might be filled with the Spirit of God. Of course, what we discover when we remove all of those wants that blind our eyes, is that the Good Shepherd has been right there alongside us the whole time.

There is an old rabbinic story about the man who left his village, weary of his life, longing for a place where he could escape all the struggles of this earth. He set out in search of a magical city--the heavenly city of his dreams, where all things would be perfect. He walked all day and by dusk found himself in a forest where he decided to spend the night. Eating a crust of bread that he had brought, he said his prayers, and just before going to sleep, placed his shoes in the center of the path, pointing them in the direction he would continue the next morning. Unbeknownst to him, however, someone appeared in the night and turned his shoes around, pointing them back in the direction from which he had come. The next morning, in all the innocence of folly, he got up, gave thanks to the God of the universe and started on his way again in the direction his shoes pointed. For a second time, he walked all day and toward evening finally saw the magical city in the distance. It wasn't as large as he had expected. As he got

¹James A. Harnish. "Finding God in Strange Places." Hyde Park Church, Tampa, Florida, October 12, 1997. retrieved from https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=1288

closer, it looked curiously familiar. But he pressed on, found a street much like his own, knocked on a familiar door, greeted the family he found there and lived happily ever after in the magical city of his dreams.²

The Good Shepherd is here with you. The Good Shepherd wants to bring purpose and direction, hope and security, joy and goodness to your life. If you let the Shepherd do this, you will find that right here amidst the normal and mundane, the tough and painful, and, yes, the joyful and good—right here in this very lifetime, there is all the want you could ever ask for because a life led by the Shepherd is the ultimate gift. Enjoy it now, don't wait for it later.

²https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=1288