

THE LORD COMFORTS**PSALM 23:4b**

Ah, the noble sheep! We've been immersing ourselves in sheep and shepherd stuff during this season of Lent when we celebrate again the central fact of our faith – the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Did you know that the Bible refers to sheep, lambs, ewes, sheepfolds, and shepherds about 600 times? Remarkable! If the Bible is indeed the Word of God, as we believe it to be, then God is saying to us, "If you want to learn something about what it means to follow My Son, Jesus, watch some literal sheep. If you want to know something about Me and My Son, Jesus, watch a faithful shepherd." The more we understand about sheep and shepherds the more we understand some amazing spiritual truths about God's relationship with us.

One of the best examples of this sheep and shepherd metaphor is Psalm 23 – one of the most well-known passages in all of the Bible. We're reflecting on it verse by verse week by week right through Easter Sunday. So what does Psalm 23 have to do with Good Friday and Easter? Jesus made the connection. He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (John 10:11 NLT) Each week we read Psalm 23 out loud and together in a different English version. Today, the version we'll read is the English Standard Version. Today, we're going to drill down on the last phrase of verse four, "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (Ps 23:4b ESV) So, the central message or truth we want to take home with us today is a simple and wonderful one: the Lord, our Shepherd, comforts us. But to understand that simple, wonderful truth better we have to understand some more sheep and shepherd imagery or metaphors.

To be specific, we need to look into shepherd's rods and staffs today. What were they and how did shepherds use them? Why were they comforting to sheep? Obviously, God doesn't use literal, physical rods or staffs on us, so what does the rod stand for? What does the staff stand for? What's the truth behind the image? What's the point of the metaphor? Now the shepherd's rod and staff were distinct and unique, yes, but they also complemented each other and were often used to perform the very same tasks. First of all, let's think about...

MY SHEPHERD'S ROD: THE WORD OF GOD.

From what I've been told both shepherds carry a minimum of equipment when they're out there in the pasture taking care of their sheep. In King David's day – he was the author of Psalm 23 – and even in Jesus' day, a rod and a staff were the common and universal equipment of a shepherd. There's a picture of both – the staff on the left and the rod on the right. In Bible times, the rod was a 2-4 foot long club used primarily to defend sheep from predators. Now, remember, there is no animal quite as defenseless and vulnerable as a sheep. It has no natural defenses. It doesn't have sharp teeth or claws. It can't run away fast. It has poor eyesight. They're about the easiest prey out there. Sheep absolutely need the protection provided by their shepherd. A shepherd used his rod to strike an attacking animal like a wolf or a mountain lion. A shepherd spent hours learning how to throw his rod like a missile at a predator with both speed

and accuracy. When David was a young man, he'd been a shepherd. He once said, "I have been taking care of my father's sheep and goats.... When a lion or a bear comes to steal a lamb from the flock, I go after it with a club and rescue the lamb from its mouth. If the animal turns on me, I catch it by the jaw and club it to death." (1 Sam. 17:34-35 NLT) David's club was likely the rod he mentioned here in Psalm 23. Sometimes a rod was used to beat back brush where snakes might be hiding as well. Its primary purpose was to keep sheep safe and sound. It's easy to understand, then, why sheep would find comfort in the shepherd's rod, isn't it? It symbolized his strength and ability to handle any dangerous situation the flock faced. It said to the sheep, "You're safe. You're protected. I have my eye on you and anything out to get you."

So, what's the rod that the good Shepherd, Jesus, uses in our lives as His sheep? I like the suggestion that it's primarily the Bible, the Word of God. The more you read Scripture, the more you reflect on Scripture, and the more you apply Scripture, the more protection you get from your spiritual enemies. Remember, like sheep, we're pretty easy prey. We have some formidable enemies according to the Bible. "For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6:12 NLT) Just like sheep, you and I are outmatched, spiritually. We're pretty much defenseless in and of ourselves.

The Bible is called a weapon in the Bible. "Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Eph. 6:17 NLT) Do you remember what Jesus did when He was tempted by the devil? He quoted Scripture to him over and over again. "It is written.... It is also written.... For it is written." (Mt. 4:4, 7, 10 NIV) There's no substitute for you personally reflecting upon and applying Scripture. Of course, it's worthwhile and good to go to Bible studies and listen to messages. But you need to learn how to reflect on and apply the Bible for yourself. That's why we emphasize the necessity of personal interaction with Scripture in our efforts to develop a discipleship culture here at KRBC. Let me know if you need help getting into God's Word for yourself. Or the next time we offer a devotional life seminar, sign up and go. Are you sick and tired of getting the tar beat out of you spiritually? Are you sick and tired of getting wounded and cut up by life? God has provided a rod to you – a club, so to speak. It's called the Word of God. But it's up to you to learn how to wield it – how to beat the tar out of the devil with it! The Bible can be a comfort to you if you know how to use it to protect yourself.

On occasion, a shepherd used his rod to discipline his sheep. No, he didn't beat the sheep with his rod, but he might throw it just past a wandering sheep about to get into some dangerous situation so it would head back to the safety of the flock. The shepherd's rod had a kind of rebuking or correcting dimension to it. Well, the Bible has the same kind of relationship to us, doesn't it? The Bible says about Scripture itself, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right." (2 Tim. 3:15 NLT) In another place, we read, "For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword.... It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires." (Heb. 4:12 NLT) Of course, the Bible can make you

feel good. It's full of reminders of God's love. It's full of God's wonderful promises. But many times, it will also expose our sinful thoughts and actions. It will rebuke us. It will correct us. Should I feel comfort in that? Absolutely! It means God wants to protect me and keep me safe even if my feelings get hurt.

Rabbi Akiva is a well-known first and second century spiritual leader from the Jewish tradition. For a period of time he was a shepherd himself. One day he noticed a tiny stream trickling down a hillside, dripping over a ledge on its way toward the river below. Just below the ledge was a massive boulder. Surprisingly, the rock bore a deep impression. The slow and steady drip, drip, drip of water over the centuries had hollowed away the stone. Akiva thought, "If mere water can do this to hard rock, how much more can God's Word carve a way into my heart of flesh?" Akiva realized that if the water had flowed over the rock all at once, the rock would have been unchanged. It was the slow but steady impact of each small droplet, year after year, that completely altered the stone. No one sermon, teacher, or commentary is going to teach you everything you need to know about God's Word. You can't learn God's truth in one marathon session. God likes to reveal His truth to us over many years. Big "splashes" aren't usually God's way of doing things. Instead, through the slow drip of reflecting on God's Word day after day, year after year, He shapes us into what He wants us to be.

One more insight about the shepherd's rod. It was a symbol of his power and authority over the flock. It was literally an extension of the shepherd's arm and hand. When sheep saw it, it was a reminder of who was in charge and that he had the power and resources to keep them safe and sound. Do you remember what God gave to Moses as a symbol of divine power and authority? After getting kicked out of Egypt, Moses became a shepherd by profession. But when God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, He turned Moses' everyday shepherd's rod into a symbol of God's power and authority. Moses used it to perform miraculous signs before Pharaoh, to bring plagues upon the land of Egypt, to divide the waters of the Red Sea so God's people could cross it, and to defeat Israel's enemies in battle. Likewise, God's Word always points to His power and authority, doesn't it? God's Word is an extension of God's will, God's mind, and God's intentions for each of us. God's comfort is more than offering me a Kleenex to dry my tears. God's Word is a constant reminder to us of who's really in charge and who has the real power. Yes, His power can seem overwhelming and scary – anything but comforting. But our Shepherd is as tender as He is powerful. What a comfort! Now, for a few moments, think with me about...

MY SHEPHERD'S STAFF: THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Today, it's more likely that modern shepherds carry a rifle rather than a rod to defend their sheep, but they're still very likely to carry and use a staff just like shepherds in Bible times. A shepherd's staff is a long, slender stick with a crook or a hook at one end. It's pretty much unique to the profession of being a shepherd – to taking care and managing sheep. A staff doesn't work very well with other livestock like cattle, horses, or pigs. A staff is designed, shaped, and adapted especially to the needs of sheep. Because sheep can get themselves into dangerous situations looking for the perfect

morsel of grass – stuck out on some rocky ledge or all caught up in a thorny bush - the curved crook of the staff is used to pull them up or out either by hooking its neck or its leg. I understand that at the bottom end of some shepherd's staffs was a spoon-shaped shovel. If a sheep wandered too far away from the flock, the shepherd scooped up a bit of mud or dirt and flicked it at the sheep to catch its attention. It was the shepherd's way of saying, "Hey, the rest of the group's over here. There's safety within the flock." We can begin to understand, then, why sheep found the shepherd's staff comforting. It provided guidance, direction, and loving protection for the sheep.

So, what's the staff that the good Shepherd, Jesus, uses in our lives as His sheep? I like the suggestion that it stands primarily for the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us that through the Holy Spirit, God provides you and me at all times shepherdly guidance, direction, and loving protection. Jesus said, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.... Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you." (Jo. 14:26; 16:7 NKJV) Jesus' promise is comforting, isn't it? The Holy Spirit Himself guides, directs, and protect us.

The Greek word there in John that describes the ministry of the Holy Spirit – Paraclete – has been translated in many different ways even in English: Helper, Counselor, Advocate, Comforter. That was true of translators of the New Testament into Karre – one of the many languages spoken in Africa. How could they describe the Holy Spirit? One day the translators came across a group of porters going off into the jungle carrying bundles on their heads. They noticed that in the line of porters there was always one who didn't carry anything, and they assumed he was the boss, there to make sure that the others did their work. However, they discovered he wasn't the boss; he had a special job. He was there should anyone fall over with exhaustion; he would come and pick up the man's load and carry it for him. This porter was known in the Karre language as "the one who falls down beside us." The translators had their word for Paraclete. The Holy Spirit is the One who falls down beside us.

The Holy Spirit isn't about limiting your life, but instead protecting and guiding you so you can experience life to the fullest. The Holy Spirit's presence means God loves us too much to leave us to ourselves. He cares enough to pull us out of trouble when we need it. He warns us when we're getting too far away from His loving care. If He didn't love us, He'd just let us wander off like some dumb sheep who ends up falling off a cliff or finds itself all alone and defenseless. Like the shepherd's staff, the Holy Spirit is the way Jesus, the good Shepherd, always watches you, always attends to you, and always is ready to jump in and rescue you when necessary. Isn't that a comforting thought?

I found it interesting that a shepherd sometimes used his staff as a way to establish a personal connection with his sheep. Sometimes, a shepherd would just put his staff along the sheep's body as they walked along in the pasture or down some trail. It was a way or reminding the sheep, "I'm here. You're safe. You have nothing to fear. I'm taking good care of you." It was a way to be in touch with his sheep. Well, the Holy

Spirit is the One who provides a sense of personal connection to Jesus, the good Shepherd, of our lives. Through the Holy Spirit, you and I are in touch with Jesus. Jesus said, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. He will bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me.” (Jo, 16:13-14 NLT) Sure, it’s important to believe the right doctrines and grow in your knowledge of the Bible. But being a follower of Jesus is more than that, right? It’s also actually experiencing and knowing the feel – or the reality - of Jesus’ touch on my life in a personal way, isn’t it? That happens when the Holy Spirit somehow impresses the presence of Jesus upon my spirit. I don’t know how the Holy Spirit does it, but I know it’s not my imagination either. Those moments of deep, profound connection with Jesus can come in some of the darkest, most difficult moments in our lives. All of a sudden, Jesus is just there – not physically, but spiritually – and we’re comforted beyond words.

Then, a shepherd’s staff demonstrated the value and importance of each sheep. A shepherd used his staff to inspect a sheep carefully. He would run it over the sheep’s body examining it for any problems or issues that needed his attention. Picture with me a sheep coming out of its pen and being stopped by the shepherd’s outstretched staff. He pokes around in the fleece with the staff. He runs his hands over the sheep’s body feeling for any sign of trouble. It was sometimes referred to “passing under the staff.” It was done literally when sheep were dedicated to the Lord. In the Bible, we read, “And every tithe of herds and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the [shepherd’s] staff, shall be holy to the LORD.” (Lev. 27:32 ESV) God used that same imagery when He said this about God’s people through the prophet, Ezekiel, “I will make you pass under the shepherd’s staff, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.” (Ez. 20:37 NET) Why did sheep find that comforting? It meant that it had been looked over with great care to make sure all was well with it. Any hidden problems were discovered and addressed by the shepherd. At the end of the day, the sheep really didn’t want to pull any wool over the shepherd’s eyes. If necessary, the shepherd got below the surface and exposed anything that needed to be set right.

The Holy Spirit reminds us of our value and importance to the good Shepherd, Jesus. You don’t really want to pull any wool over His eyes either, do you? Don’t you want Him to get below the surface of your life and expose anything that needs to be set right? Isn’t that why we take time to confess our sins before we receive Communion this morning? We want to be right, clean, and healthy before Him. In another psalm he wrote, David said, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.” (Ps. 139:23-24 NLT)

Getting “passed under the staff,” so to speak, underlines our importance and value to Jesus, the good Shepherd. To us a flock of sheep just look all the same. We don’t know one animal from the next. Not true of a good shepherd. A good shepherd knows his sheep – each one of them. To him every sheep is uniquely precious and special. Jesus emphasized that truth spiritually when He said, “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.... I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know

me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father.” (Jo. 10:3, 14-15 NLT) The Lord’s Table before us today is a powerful reminder of just how important and valuable you - just you, just one of His sheep - are to the good Shepherd. Think of Communion today as a way of getting “passed under the shepherd’s staff.” You matter. You count. You have eternal value. Who says so? Your Shepherd. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11 NLT)

Bible scholar and pastor N.T. Wright tells a story about an Anglican archbishop who was hearing a confession of sin from three hardened teenagers in his church. All three boys were trying to make a joke out of it. They met with the archbishop and confessed to a long list of ridiculous and terrible sins that they had not committed. It was all a poor joke. The archbishop played along with the first two who ran out of the church laughing. But then he listened carefully to the third prankster. Before the young man got away, he told him, "Okay, you've confessed these sins. Now I want you to do something to show your repentance. I want you to walk up to the far end of the church and I want you to look at the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross. Then, I want you to look at His face and say, 'You did all that for me and I don't care that much.' And I want you to do that three times."

And so the boy went up to the front, looked at the picture of Jesus and said, "You did all that for me and I don't care that much." And then he said it again, but then he couldn't say it the third time because he broke down in tears. The archbishop who told that story explained that the reason he knew that story was that he was, in fact, that young man. There is something about the cross. There is something about Jesus dying there for us which leaps over all the theoretical discussions, all the possibilities of how we explain it this way or that way. It just gets a hold of us. And when we are grasped by it, somehow we have a sense that what is grasping us is the love of God.

Do you know who makes the cross real to us? The Holy Spirit. Do you know who makes Jesus real to us? The Holy Spirit. Do you know who reminds us of our value and importance to Jesus, the good Shepherd? The Holy Spirit. “Your rod (the Word of God) and your staff (the Holy Spirit), they comfort me.”