**Date**: 24 September 2023

**Services**: *Across the Diocese*

**Series**: Peace Forgiveness Contentment

**Title**: Peace in an age of anxiety

**Passage**: Psalm 23

**Outline**

1. **The most frequent command, the most common challenge**
2. **Think like a sheep, the ancient sheep and shepherd, and if you’ve got a good shepherd, you’re one happy sheep**
3. **Provision, protection and perspective**
4. **Who is the shepherd? Do you know him?**

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**Introduction**

* I have two opening questions for you.
* What do you think is the most frequent **command** in the Bible?
* Some may jump to ‘love’, or ‘love the Lord your God’.
* That may be the most **important**, but it is not the most **frequent**.
* What do you think is the most frequent command in the Bible?
* The most frequent command in the Bible is ‘**do not be afraid’.**
* And it comes from God, from prophets, from angels…
* Do not be afraid… the most frequent command in all the Bible.
* Let me ask you another question.
* What is the most frequent **psychiatric** problem in today’s society?
* **Depression**?
* **Anxiety**!
* 14% of the population have at some time experience an anxiety disorder.
* This is not just some time feeling a bit anxious about the exam coming up… but an actual anxiety disorder of one kind or another…
* It may be very serious like anorexia or bulimia or depression…
* It may be something less serious, but 14% is a lot of people.
* And I just wonder whether the most frequent command in the Bible and the most frequent psychiatric problem today in society… I wonder if they’re related!!!??
* Do not be **afraid**…. /// **anxiety**…
* You wouldn’t think that in the land we lived in, anxiety would be such a problem…
* We live in a beautiful place – mountains, hills, slopes, plains… all the beautiful beaches we want if we head to the coast…
* We have plenty of food… all of us here today – I’m guessing – have food to eat… clothes to put on, things to do, people who love us…
* Why on earth…. In fun, laid back Australia, are so many people impacted by **anxiety**… if there was one nation on earth where you’d think this shouldn’t be a problem… you’d think we’d be it!
* And yet, anxiety is a serious presenting problem…. ///
* …and my guess is that some of here today have come to church, **anxious**!
* What sort of things make us anxious?
* Fear? People? Loneliness? Financial concerns? Conflict? Disappointment? Past abuse? The unknown? Illness?
* Those and many other issues… just some of what makes us anxious…
* Let’s turn to Psalm 23 – and see if we can find some help in dealing with anxiety
* …where the person who wrote the Psalm says, “The Lord is my shepherd, there’s nothing I want!”
* That’s an extraordinary position to be in isn’t it – not wanting for anything… because the LORD – God is my shepherd… God is the one I look to, turn to, trust.
* What does this mean….?
* To get our head around this Psalm, there are three clues…
1. **we have to think like a sheep**…
* we may not like to think of ourselves as sheep because they’re said to be so unintelligent… but it may not be that they’re unintelligent – but they are anxious….
* And they’re anxious because they know where they fit on the scale of things…

If you trained up your best sheep…. Trained it for a fight… put some muscle on it…show it how to fight and then put it up against the weakest lion, I can tell you where my money will be – it will be on the weak lion…

Sheep know there a plenty of people out there who like a bit lamb chop – so they know they’re vulnerable!

* So they’ll just run. They’ll just follow the first sheep that runs figuring that sheep has the answer – and they’ll take off
* In some ways this is how we are
* We come across all brave and strong to one another – but inside – we’re in turmoil – we’re in trouble… we have things going on which we don’t even want to talk about with others… and we’ll find someone going somewhere offering something and we’ll run! ///
* We have to think like a sheep to get this Psalm
* Second clue to getting the psalm is that we have to understand the:
1. **The ancient sheep and the shepherd**
* And we have to forget everything we know about sheep in Australia.
* We’re talking about sheep in the ancient near east where every sheep was part of a little tiny flock of perhaps 30 – 40 sheep – and yes, the shepherd did know each of the sheep by name.
* And it was an individual relationship between the sheep and shepherd.
* But if you were a sheep following a good shepherd, then guess what? – you were safe. You could rest easy.
* Because what the shepherd would do was to take the sheep and lead them to a place of green pastures where they could feed and then when they had had enough – lie down.
* He would lead them to quiet – not running waters – so they could drink in peace
* He would restore them if they were sick and injured – he would carry medicines in his belt… so he could tend their wounds
* And when they went through dark valleys, which they sometimes had to do to get to good pasture on the other side, and the sheep were terribly anxious because the predators came out of the shadows… then as long as the sheep followed the shepherd, they would be safe – they would be OK
* So let me assure you,
1. **if you’ve got a good shepherd, you’re one happy sheep!**
* …because everything is taken care of… no problems at all. As long as you keep following that shepherd, as long as you listen to his voice and follow his lead, everything is taken care of.
* Now, who was this person who wrote this Psalm?
* Was he a weak kind of person who felt that he was like a little sheep – useless and vulnerable and therefore needing a shepherd to follow?
* Well – no – this is King David – one of the most famous – most bold – courageous – fearless kings in the history of Israel
* This is the one who as a little boy took some stones and threw one at the giant of man Goliath…
* This is the guy who was chased about by his predecessor Saul all over the countryside looking to take his life, and he stood his ground, and prevailed.
* And this is the guy who was later chased all around the countryside by the Philistines and he continued to fight them off
* So this is not some little weak little mamby pamby person, but a strong, bold, courageous person – and yet – he knew his weaknesses – he had his moments
* Just read some of the other Psalms and you’ll see how he struggled… - when he knew everyone was against him
* He struggled when the enemy was camping at the door waiting to take his life
* He struggled through the rebellion – the twists and turns of his own family
* He struggled when his little boy died… as a baby – and cries out to God
* Yes, he was a strong, big, courageous guy, but he had his weaknesses that is for sure – he had his vulnerabilities.
* …much like you and me…
* …as strong and a brave face we like to put on, we know our weaknesses. We know what makes us anxious.
* And yet David was able to say “The Lord is my shepherd”
* My shepherd is none other than the God of the universe.
* So let’s get into the Psalm then and see exactly what God the shepherd provided for David.
* There were three -
1. **Provision**
2. **Protection**
3. **Perspective**
4. **Provison**
* The Lord is my shepherd, there’s nothing I want.
* He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters.... he restores my soul.
* …he leads me in the paths of righteousness his name’s sake
* you can feel the serenity... as I recite the words…
* but of course what David is saying is more than about food and water… God restores my very self
* he gives me a place of calm…
* and when I’m lost; when I’m broken…. When I’m confused… when I’m anxious…
* …he restores me – I get stronger because of him… I’m remade… because of my shepherd…
* I wonder if you know any of that?
* I wonder if you know any of that because of your relationship with God and the presence of God in your life and his touch upon your life…
* I wonder if perhaps you’ve known it in the past, and yet have wandered away and have lost it in the presence somehow – other things have come in and taken over and you’ve been looking for help to anyone else except the shepherd!
* You’ve been looking perhaps to your career for your identity or fulfilment, or your bank balance for your security, or to your family to know you are precious and loved… AND they’ve all disappointed!!
* You’ve looled to anything else but the sheperd to find rest… and a centre and a peace and a belonging and w way forward…
* And yet…. It’s not working…
* … it’s not working… because in the end, you need the shepherd, you need HIS love and care… you need HIS presence in your life…
* And then David talks about
1. **Protection**
* … he talks about going through the valley of the shadow of death
* All of us know dark days…
* If we’ve not faced our own death, than many of us have faced death in other ways… some of us here may have lost a son or daughter… you’ve known dark days indeed.
* Dark days just fearing for what is happening with your children or grandchildren… or through an illness of a loved one.
* And yet what does David say?
* Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil…. I won’t be anxious…
* Why? Because you are with me!
* Here’s the promise – that when you run to your shepherd – when you trust the shepherd – than even in the darkest of times, you can hold it together – not because you’re so **great** – but because your **shepherd** is so **great**!
* ‘Your staff and your rod’ – signs of protection – the shepherd would actually use those to beat off predators.
* Maybe you’ve come here today in a dark valley for one reason or another... the dark valley is not only something the shepherd will be with you in, but he will lead you through… to the other side.
* …and out to the other side into greener pastures…
* … so there’s provision, there’s protection, and there’s:
1. **Perspective**
* …for where does the Psalm finish up?
* Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life… that is – the original language… not just **follow** – but **pursue** me
* So even through the most confusing, difficult, confronting times, God’s goodness and love will actually run after me…
* So you’ve got the shepherd in **front** – and you have goodness and love following **after**…
* What a great thing to know… //
* And then there is the promise of dwelling in the house of the Lord forever – of eternal life
* This is the guy who had slept with Bathsheba… And when she became pregnant, had her husband knocked off…
* But he knew that he’d been profoundly forgiven…

These are the only grounds any of us can be sure of eternal life – if we’ve come to know the forgiveness of God which WE know has been made possible through Jesus. ///

* Let’s finish
* two closing questions for you
1. **Who is this shepherd?**
* Yes, we’ve said that he’s the God of the universe
* But when we open our New Testaments, we find that Jesus is described as the Good Shepherd
* Jesus is God in human form
* /….God turned up on earth
* And he is the one who is described as the Good Shepherd
* He is the one who is described as the one who knows everyone individually… who knows our voices…
* He is the one who has laid down his life for his sheep – that’s how committed he is to us…
* And he laid down his life for us to meet us at our deepest point of need which was to be forgiven!
* in the death of resurrection of Jesus – forgiveness is held out anyone and everyone…
* So you want no other shepherd than Jesus who knows you individually… who knows your needs and has so acted on your behalf that he’s laid down his life for you…
* And he didn’t stay dead… he rose again to new life and continues to be our shepherd
* He continues to invite you to turn to him and to trust him and walk with him and rest in him…
* He continues to invite you and no matter what anxiety you currently know // to cling to him… to find safety in him.
1. **Do you know the shepherd?**
* Do you know the touch of Jesus in your life?
* Have you experienced anything of what it means to run to him and find the hope and help – and strength that you need – that you long for?
* If you don’t know the shepherd, I want to invite you to explore more about Jesus… turn to someone who can help – who knows… and ask – find out more about Jesus – who he is and why he come and what he’s done… to understand that he wants to be part of your life… to understand what it might mean for you to have Jesus as your Shepherd.
* No, it doesn’t mean life is always going to be easy but in the dark valleys – he’ll not only be with you but take you through…
* So friends – run to the shepherd – don’t run to him second or third or fourth option – when you’ve tried everything else – go to him first.
* He wants to be your shepherd. //// May it be that you TOO can say “The Lord is my Shepherd, there’s nothing I want”.
* You know before the days of internet and TV – when people sat round in their drawing rooms after dinner and sing songs or recite poetry, there’s a story of family a couple of hundred years ago… of a family doing just that after dinner…
* And there was a Shakespearian actor with them... and eventually someone asked the actor to recite Psalm 23.
* And the actor – agreed – and did – and did it brilliantly and beautifully and the people and pitch was right and the speed was spot on and his diction was perfect
* And that at the end everyone politely clapped //
* The old minister from the village was also there that night…
* And so they turned to him and said – would you ***also*** recite the Psalm… he agreed
* He wasn’t word perfect. His voice trembled a little. He forgot a couple of words here and there
* But at the end of his recital?... there were tears running down people’s eyes…
* Polite clap in response to the Shakespearian actor…. And tears in when the minister had recited the Psalm
* What was the difference?
* The actor said – I suppose you want to know what just happened?
* And he got up and explained
* He said – I knew the **Psalm**… the old minister – he knows the **shepherd //**
* Do you know the Shepherd?
* That’s where you’ll find peace for you anxiety.
* In him
* Through him
* …this his presence in your life
* Go to the shepherd with your anxiety
* Trust him
* Speak with him
* Open your heart to him
* Draw strength from him
* And he will renew your soul
* He will retore you
* He will make you strong
* His goodness and love will pursue you…
* …all the way until you find your rest with him // with no more anxiety ever…. In eternal life… ///
* The Lord is my shepherd… There’s nothing I want…
* In him, you will find peace…. // for all your anxiety.