

The King of Love My Shepherd Is

Lutheran Service Book 709 | study by Marion Lars Hendrickson

Introduction

Whom do you trust? What are the voices that call you? A mother calls to her children to get ready for bed. A teacher calls students to come in from the playground to get ready for class. A police officer commands, “Stop!” A doctor says to a patient, “We must talk.” A young man on bended knee asks his beloved, “Will you marry me?” We hear and trust many voices.

Yet, there are other voices that call. The voice of advertising says, “You cannot live without this product.” The voice

of temptation says, “You owe it to yourself.” The devil asks, “Did God really say...?” We hear and doubt many voices.

Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life” (John 10:27–28).

- How do you decide whether or not to trust what someone says?
- Is it possible to ever fully trust anyone?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Ps. 23:1. This verse states the theme of the entire psalm: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

- What is the comfort in this confession of trust?
- What challenges in your own life put this confession of trust to the test?

Read Ps. 23:2–3.

- What four actions does the shepherd undertake?
- Give examples of His actions from your own life.

Read Ps. 23:4.

- According to this verse, is suffering a given in life?

Read John 10:11–18. Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd and says, “I lay down my life for the sheep” (v. 15).

- In what ways does Jesus fulfill the trust expressed in Ps. 23:4?

The shepherd’s rod was a short club used as a weapon to defend the flock from predators. The staff was a long stick for guiding the flock and retrieving strays.

- How is the cross of Jesus both a rod to protect the flock of the Good Shepherd and also the staff that sustains the flock?

Read Ps. 23:5–6. The scene changes from the open fields to a setting of hospitality.

- As sheep of the Good Shepherd’s flock, what table does He set for us?
- What is the “goodness and mercy” from that table that follows us all the days of our lives?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Henry W. Baker (1821–77) was an Anglican priest of the high church tradition who served a parish in Herefordshire, England. Even today this county is a popular tourist destination for sightseers in search of the “real” England of unspoiled, green and rolling countryside. This scenic domain was coupled with Baker’s own rich vision of the Christian life, a life thoroughly shaped by the Gospel and Sacraments within the living traditions of the ancient Church. Baker was a strong advocate of the views expressed within the Oxford Movement.

This rich resource of images and allusions drawn from the Church and from the land found deep expression in Baker’s hymn paraphrase of Psalm 23. Although Baker

asked John Dykes to compose a tune, different from the Irish melody in *LSB*, the wedding of text and tune (whether Dykes’ tune or “St. Columba”) wraps the singer in the atmosphere of the psalm, a decidedly idyllic atmosphere that breathes the air of the English shire and the Irish glen.

- Name two or three other hymns in which both text and tune are so wedded together as to be inseparable.
- Like Martin Luther, Baker held that music could “preach” the text. What does this mean?

This hymn paraphrase of Psalm 23 is set to the tune of the Irish folk melody “St. Columba.”

- How does the Celtic melody color the images of this text?

- What is gained by the text with the musical associations of this melody? Is anything lost?

Text

Stanza 1 quickly reveals that “trust” is not an abstract feeling. It is grounded on a firm foundation. “I am His / And He is mine forever.”

- What specific actions has Jesus taken toward us that we may have the confident trust to sing, “I am His / And He is mine”?

In stanza 2, the text proclaims, “Where streams of living water flow, / My ransomed soul He leadeth.”

- In what ways is the phrase “streams of living water” an allusion to Holy Baptism? To the Holy Spirit?
- From what you have learned about Holy Baptism from the Small Catechism, how does our Good Shepherd “lead us” by this Sacrament?

This second stanza closes with the words, “With food celestial feedeth.” This image is tied together with the “transport of delight” flowing “From Thy pure chalice” in stanza 5.

- Can this be an allusion to the Lord’s Supper? Why or why not?
- Explain what it means that by the bread and cup of the Sacrament, “I am [Christ’s] / And He is mine.”

Making the Connection

“Good Shepherd, may I sing Thy praise...!” Not every person has lived in an agrarian setting where sheep are common. Some who sing this hymn may always have lived in an urban setting, having no personal familiarity with the image of a shepherd and a flock of sheep.

In Closing

After the Christian has been following his Good Shepherd for a long time, a voice may ask, “Have you lacked for anything?” The answer given by faith is “Nothing.”

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 709.

- In what ways does the participation in Christ’s body and blood nourish our trust in Him?

The poet, Henry Baker, had the words of stanza 3 on his lips as he died in 1877. In this he echoed Martin Luther’s dying words, “We are beggars; this is true.” Regardless of our condition, “in love” Christ seeks us. Stanza 4 goes on to show the full extent of Christ’s love.

- Find phrases throughout the hymn text that show that Christ’s love is an active love.
- What is the height of Christ’s love? What action of His love is alluded to in stanza 4?
- In the mystery of the crucifixion, Jesus Himself cries out, “Why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). What effect does this cry have on our trust in Christ? What effect does it have on our trust in God’s goodness and mercy?

The closing two stanzas sing of a life of trust that flows from Christ’s cross in the new life that is revealed in His resurrection.

- Do you read any allusions to Easter in this hymn text? If so, what words suggest this?
- It is the resurrection of Jesus that reveals the basis of our trust in singing, “Thy goodness faileth never” (st. 6). In what ways is our trust in Christ tested and strengthened when the promise of Easter is hidden under the experiences of Christ’s cross that we share?

- What elements of the text transcend the pastoral imagery of Psalm 23?
- What do you think it is about Psalm 23 that makes this psalm so immensely popular in so many human settings?

Prayer

Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Easter in the Three-Year Lectionary).