

"The LORD is My Shepherd" ~ Psalm 23

January 5 Anno Domini 1998

The Funeral Sermon for Helen Abercrombie

Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy and peace to you, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear family members, friends, and neighbors of Helen Abercrombie,

Today, once more, as we have just sung in the sermon hymn, we are reminded that Jesus says to us, *I Am the Good Shepherd*. The sheep follow Him because they know His voice. Helen was, and is, one of the Lord's sheep. In the hour of trial the faithful Christian knows where to go. They go, as Helen did, to the Good Shepherd. Such people seek the Lord and His Word of comfort and hope. One of the favorite places of refuge in God's Word is the 23rd Psalm.

Helen, in anticipation of your being here this day, wanted you to hear the message of God's love and grace and mercy on the basis of the 23rd Psalm. From this psalm we hear the Christian's steadfast confidence and confession of faith in the first words of the psalm ...

...*"The Lord is My Shepherd*

Please recite that psalm with me.

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His Name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. Amen.*

The 23rd Psalm helps us to answer the question, "Who is this Shepherd that takes away all my want? The answer is that this the Lord God, Yahweh Himself, the great Jehovah. He is the One Who sent His Son into this world. He is the One Who was born in Bethlehem. He is the One Who works faith in our hearts through the Good News of His love. In particular, we like to think of Jesus Christ, the Shepherd Who died for us and rose again. The Lord Jesus holds out His nail-pierced hands to receive us and to accept us and to keep us forever ... in His hands.

Is there anyone here who does not know, who does not recognize the Good Shepherd? The Lord, this King of creation and Lord of Life knows our every need ... knows our greatest needs. *The LORD is my*

shepherd; I shall not want. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. What enemies? Oh, what enemies!

There is the greatest enemy that each of us must face ... the enemy within. No good thing dwells in our old sinful nature that clings to us from the beginning to the end of our days on this earth. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* Helen knew that was true for all people and confessed that it was true for her. A couple of hours prior to her physical death, she confessed her sin and heard the forgiveness that Christ earned for her in His sin-atoning death on the cross.

There are temptations all around us. Temptations of pride, money, power, position, academics, and sex come from every sector, calling us like side-show hawkers. The prince of this world, Satan, does not leave us unmolested. During the time of trouble, he attacks with doubts and on a day when the end is in sight, he defiantly asks, "And where is the Lord your shepherd now?"

However, the Christian who keeps his eyes focused on Jesus ... recalling His devil-defeating death and trusting in our Lord's triumphant, victorious resurrection ... hears the Word of confident faith. David said it in the psalm ... *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me.* Helen, with her calm eyes and untroubled mind, said the same thing the other evening a couple hours before she departed this world and entered Paradise.

The Lord leads His people by the still waters of Baptism, restoring our souls ... not just once, but a thousands times each day. Those who know His voice and follow Him are lead in the paths of righteousness for His Name's sake ... for His Name's sake. Think about some of His names ... Savior, Redeemer, the Bread of Life, the Living Water, the Door, Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Prince of Peace, Immanuel, God with us, the Son of David, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Suffering Servant, the Rock, the Alpha, the Omega, the Resurrection and the Life, the First and the Last, and the Good Shepherd. Because He is all these names and more, our cup runneth over and He leads His people in the paths of righteousness for His Name's Sake.

The Christian is empowered to believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ and that He is with us always to the very end of the age. The psalmist declares that truth boldly, *for Thou art with me.* What an assurance, not only on the good days, but especially when the day of one's death draws near. When death casts its dark shadow, we need not be afraid. Helen wasn't because she knew the Good Shepherd and said to Him, *I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.*

In death, the Christian is never alone. Even if no one is there ... even if family and friends are not there at the moment of death ... even if a husband or wife has been taken from your side ... you are not alone. Helen was not alone in that room in the Coronary Care Unit of the Caldwell hospital on Tuesday evening. She knew that, at any moment, she might be taken home by the Good Shepherd Who was with her. She looked forward to it ... she prayed for it.

As a part of her deathbed devotion that late afternoon, I asked Helen if there was anything that she needed to talk about, or that she need to take care of, or that she needed to say, or that she wanted to pray for. The only reply that she made was something like this, "I don't want to suffer anymore." She was not afraid of dying ... *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.* Two hours later, the Lord answered her prayer.

Faith and belief look at the Son of God wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger; marvel at the 12 year old Jesus questioning the religious leaders in the Temple; witness the temptation of the hungry Creator in the desert; hear the voice of God calming the sea; behold the Almighty God washing His disciples dirty feet; watch the Incarnate God take bread and say *This is My Body*; view the Lord of Life arraigned in mankind's court; hear the dying Son praying to His Father to forgive us; feel the quaking earth as Jesus dies and when the stone is rolled away from the tomb; gaze upon the nailmarks in the risen Lord's hands; and responds by stating, *I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me*. Faith and trust look at all that the Lord God has done, is doing, and will do and says in a confident, bold declaration, *surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever*.

That is where Helen is and this is where we're at. Are you able to say, not only with your mouth, but with your heart, *The Lord is my Shepherd* ? The story is told of a famous orator whose voice and articulation were exceptional. He recited the 23rd Psalm and it was beautiful. Then he listened to an old woman recite the same 23rd Psalm -- not as well, not so clear, not so articulate. The orator marveled at the old woman and said, "Something is obvious to me. I know the 23rd Psalm; she knows the Good Shepherd!"

Which one are you? Perhaps you have wandered away from the Lord and His Church. If so, then may Helen's picking of this sermon text be the time when the Good Shepherd finds you once again. If you have never known the Lord or if you have had a faulty understanding of Who He is and what He has done for you, then may God grant you the faith to hear His voice and be one of His own. And if you have never wandered away from the Lord and His Church, then may the words you have heard be an encouragement to remain steadfast in the Word and the work of the Lord. May God grant all of us today, the clarity of mind and the sincerity of heart to be able to say

... *The Lord is My Shepherd!*

Let's speak those words of the 23rd Psalm one more time.

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His Name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. Amen.*