Azure blue skies with wisps of high, white clouds; streams of luminescent gold from the sun cascading down onto long grass, greener than you’ve ever seen before; a placid, glass-like brook wending its way through the background; snow-white sheep without spot or stain dotting the pasture as they serenely graze here and there; and in the middle, a kindly, handsome, bearded shepherd, draped in spotless robes; that’s the image that comes to my mind when I hear Psalm 23. Actually, I suppose it’s not too far off the painting up here on the wall.

It’s a beautiful scene, isn’t it? So calming. So peaceful. Some of you grew up in farming families. And if you drive around town, you can still see vestiges of that agricultural heritage. Even some of the subdivision names are taken from the families that used to own the land. But friends, we aren’t in Kansas anymore! When you’re sitting at a light on Lindbergh, or crawling along I-270 during rush hour, it can be so easy to wish it all away – the honking horns and thumping stereos. Wouldn’t it be nice to escape to the cool green pastures of Psalm 23.

You see, it’s not just the rural images that come to mind in this psalm. It’s the overwhelming sense of peace you get when you read it. The world is busy. It’s only getting busier. We’re in a rat race of work, family obligations, social functions, tax and premium fee deadlines, doctors’ appointments. Life feels like a never ending marathon. You get to the top of one hill, only to see another rise up right in front of you. You’re never really done. You may try to convince yourself that if you get this one job done, you’ll finally be caught up! But you’re never really caught up, are you? No, there’s always more to be done. Most of the time, it feels like we’re just barely holding on by our fingertips . . . and sometimes life doesn’t even feel that secure.

But there’s no sense of anxiety in Psalm 23, is there? Everything is calm. Everything is squared away. There’s no rush. There’s no hurry. There’s nothing hanging over anybody’s head. David has nothing to worry about. He has no cause for anxiety, because everything has been done for him. The Shepherd takes care of it all. David doesn’t have to worry about what he’ll eat or drink. The Shepherd leads him to the perfect spot. David doesn’t have to worry about enemies. The Shepherd’s got it covered – a staff to guide, a rod to defend.

David describes a sense of peace so deep, that he doesn’t even fear the valley of the shadow of death. He can’t see anything. He doesn’t know what lies ahead. He can’t tell if there’s a lion lurking behind the next boulder. But it doesn’t matter. None of it matters. None of it matters because his Shepherd is walking right there alongside him. Jesus is with Him, and nothing else matters.

We forget it so often, but that is the type of peace that you and I have. We forget that Jesus is our Shepherd. He’s the Shepherd who gives us everything we need. He’s the Shepherd
who isn’t afraid to get down in the dirt when we’ve sinned. He takes us to Himself and washes us clean. We have that type of peace, because Jesus has already gone through the valley of the shadow of death. He’s gone through it and come out alive. And you can know for certain that He’ll bring you out alive too. You want the kind of peace David describes in Psalm 23? You’ve got it! Because Jesus has you!

But, of course, there is something about this Psalm that we ignore most of the time. David never comes out and states it explicitly, but it’s there by implication. If the Lord is his Shepherd, if the Lord is your shepherd, that would make you a . . . sheep. Who wants to be a sheep? The only part we like about it is the whole being provided for thing. They’re unbelievably stupid. They’re defenseless. They’re dirty. They smell bad. And they’re dependent on the shepherd for literally everything. Who wants to be a sheep?

But there’s one thing in particular about being called sheep that we find especially offensive. Sheep are not critical thinkers. They aren’t free thinkers. They don’t make up their minds for themselves. By nature, they are followers – every last one of them! In fact, one of the worst insults you’ll hear on talk radio is when a host refers to his political opponents as “sheeple” – mindless individuals who don’t have the brains to think for themselves. Followers.

But you’re not a follower! You want to make up your own mind about things. You only believe what make sense to you. You use your brain to determine what’s right and wrong, practical and impractical. You don’t just want to accept what you’re told. You want to question, critique, accept, or reject based on your own evaluation of things. You’re a free, an independent thinker, after all!

We teach our children to do the same thing. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard parents counsel their children that they have to “make up their own minds” about things, especially about religion. We don’t want them to be sheeple either! We like to think that we are in charge, that we sit in judgment. And we teach our children to imagine the same thing about themselves.

In December of 1957, the hit musical “The Music Man” premiered on Broadway. It tells the story of confidence trickster Harold Hill, who eventually straightens up after falling for the town librarian of River City, Iowa. But when he arrived in the town, he quickly devised the perfect scheme to fleece the locals out of a whole lot of money. The public grade school had no band. So he marketed himself as Professor Harold Hill, graduate of the Gary (Indiana) Conservatory of Music, class of ’05. Now, he knew absolutely nothing about music, but he managed to hide that fact for quite a while. He claimed to teach based on the latest method in music education – the “Think System”. It required not scales, no music theory, no practice of any kind, really. All the students had to do was to think really, really hard about a piece of music. And after they’d thought a lot, Professor Hill guaranteed that the music would simply flow out of the students’ instruments.
Well, eventually the time came for the school band to give a concert. The children were suited up in their razor sharp, bright red uniforms. Professor Harold Hill raised his baton, brought it down and . . . the band made most horrendous racket you’ve ever heard in your life. Harold Hill was not a professor. He was not a musician. He was not a teacher. He was a conman. When he tried to be something he wasn’t, it was a complete disaster.

We don’t like the idea of being sheeple. But that’s what we are. And when we try to be something else, things go badly . . . very badly. God has told us what marriage is supposed to look like, how He designed. But instead of simply following His voice, we get it into our heads that we know better. And that maybe marriage doesn’t have to be the way God says it should be. Maybe it can be about self-fulfillment and meeting my needs, and not about self-sacrifice. But then what happens? Broken hearts, broken dreams, and eventually broken marriages.

God has told us what our relationship with money ought to be. But instead of simply following His voice, we get it into our heads that we know better. We think that tithing doesn’t really matter all that much. We think that what we really need to do is to stockpile it away so that we’ve got enough to give us a sense of peace. But then what happens? Worries about money consume us. And the money we thought we were controlling actually ends up controlling us.

God has told us that we must forgive those who sin against us. But instead of simply following His voice, we get it into our heads that we know better. We tell ourselves that we can only forgive when we feel ready to do it. We tell ourselves that we can only forgive after the offender has apologized and shown us that they really have changed. But then what happens? Our hearts grow bitter and hard, and in our refusal to give forgiveness, we find it harder and harder to receive forgiveness.

God has told us that we need to be in His Word. We need to take time to read it, to hear it, to meditate on it. But instead of simply following His voice, we get it into our heads that we know better. We think we’ll be just fine without devotions, without a consistent and disciplined prayer-life. But then occasional worship becomes infrequent and eventually non-existent. Your once lively faith burns down to an ember and you wonder why it feels like God has abandoned you.

You see, we are sheeple. That’s who we are. We can’t be anything else and things go very badly when we try to be something we’re not. We are followers. We are needy. We are completely dependent. We are sheeple. There’s no question about that. The only question that remains is this – who is your shepherd? Because in the end, there are only two.

Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep . . . I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”
The thief and the shepherd are both calling out to you. But they will lead you to very different places. The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy. The thief comes and tries to convince you that you really aren’t a sheep at all, that you are independent, self-sufficient, autonomous. He tries to convince you that should go out on your own and find your own pasture. But when the wolf comes, he doesn’t help. And when you find yourself staring into the black, gaping abyss of the valley of the shadow of death, he’ll shove you right in all by yourself. The thief is Satan. And he’s always calling out to you.

But you are a sheep of the true shepherd. He doesn’t tempt you to be something other than what you are. You are a sheep and He is glad to be your Shepherd. And what a Shepherd He is. He has called you by name and no one will snatch you out of His hand. Your Shepherd is Jesus. He gives you all you need for your body. He sustains you in faith with His Word. He gives you hope, and joy, and peace. And, finally, this good Shepherd does something really amazing. He invites us sheep into His house . . . to eat at His table. It’s not so bad being a sheep. Not when your shepherd is Jesus. Amen.