

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## The Shepherd Guides Us

Sunday, March 24, 2019

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### Psalm 23

Some of you may know the name Norman Vincent Peale. He wrote the book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. How many of you have ever read that book? Classic. Makes you really positive, doesn't it? Well, Peale used to love to tell the story of the time he finished speaking at a rotary meeting once. A man approached him, and said, "Dr. Peale, you've changed my life," and Peale said, "Well, tell me more about this." The man said, "Well, about two years ago, I was at rock bottom in my life. I was failing at work. I was failing at my marriage. I was at my wit's end, and I was contemplating suicide, but then I looked at my desk and there was an article written by you, and I picked it up, and I read it, and you said in that article that one of the wisest things anybody can do is take God as their partner.

"Right then, and there," he said, "I went down to my knees behind my desk, and began to pray, 'Lord, I don't come to you often I know, but I need help. My life is failing. My work is failing. My marriage is failing. I don't know what to do. I don't know how this works, but I need you in my life. I want you to be my partner,' I said. Dr. Peale, I'll tell ya, I kid you not. Two weeks later, thereabouts, I started to get these new ideas for my work, new ideas for my job, my marriage improved, and I had so much joy in my life, and now I don't just go to God for emergencies, now God is my partner."

Well folks, I want to reveal something so powerfully simple for you today that sometimes we miss it. God wants to be your partner in life. God wants to guide you. God wants to empower you. God wants to lead you. God wants to give you wisdom.

I think that's one of the things that David the Psalmist wanted to get across in the 23rd Psalm in that phrase, "He leads me in right paths." "He leads me in right paths," and I don't know about you, but in my life, my gosh, that Shepherd who is in my heart, and my soul has led me in right paths beyond myself. I have found myself in places I could never get to on my own, but I couldn't get there without the partner, my partner in life, God almighty.

So this morning, I want to share with you today how to allow God to guide you, because I don't know what you

come in to worship with today. Maybe you have a decision to make in your life, and you are dreading it, and you don't know what to do. Maybe there's a stirring in your soul you don't like to talk about with other people, but you don't know how to deal with it. You don't know how to decipher it, and you need some kind of guidance, divine guidance. Maybe you're troubled in your life, and there's a fork in the road in your life, and you need to know exactly where to go, but you're not sure, and you're terrified about it. Well, this morning I want to share with you how to allow yourself to be guided by the Shepherd who so desperately wants to guide, and empower us, and give us wisdom for life, but the question is how do we do it, right?

We know God wants to guide us. We know God wants to be our Shepherd, but the question is, 'Well Charley, how in the world do we do it? It sounds great for a preacher to get up in church, and say, 'God wants to guide you. God wants to lead you,' but how does that happen?'

One of the things I've learned in my life, and one of the things I've learned in my faith is that when it comes to allowing God to guide us, and really experience that, it's not so much about gaining a new insight, or a new experience, as it is flushing away wrong thinking, flushing away wrong assumptions.

One of the first things I need to tell you today when it comes to being guided by the Shepherd, and being led to the right path is that we need to know that speed kills. Can you say that? Speed kills.

When I served in Orlando many years ago, that's when I first took up golf, and I got to know a golf pro in Orlando who was a really nice guy, a very wise philosophical guy, too, and the first time I stepped into his office, there was a sign behind his desk that read this: Speed Kills. I'd never seen that before. First-time golfer, and I looked at him, and I said, "Did you work for the Department of Transportation before you became a golf pro?" He said, "No Charley, don't you know what that means?" I said, "No." He says, "Most amateur golfers think the secret to golf is hard, and fast. That's not how you swing your club. Rapid movement kills a swing. If you want consistency, if you want distance, swing easier." He continued, "The same thing is true in life, isn't it,

Charley?" The faster we move, the more we rush, the more we go here, and there. Sometimes it can be very destructive spiritually, and so often that's our life, isn't it? We rush around, and we miss so much the Shepherd wants to give us.

Many years ago, I did a wedding at the Fox Theater in the Egyptian Ballroom. I don't know if that's still around. A very elaborative affair, huge wedding. There were about 42 bridesmaids, and groomsmen, I think. There was a wedding coordinator we affectionately called the Wedding Nazi. You know some of those? Told us when to stand, when to sit, when to shut up, and all that, right?

We got to the ceremony. It was a beautiful affair—I don't know how much it cost. I could imagine the bill, but it was elaborate, beautiful. The bride looked beautiful in her gown, the groom looked handsome. The music was unbelievable, and so we had this nice ceremony, and it came time for my little short homily. Yes, I give short ones sometimes, and right in the middle of my homily, I noticed the bride was looking very nervous. In fact, she looked nervous the whole time, but she looked at me as I'm trying to give this wisdom to them, and she looked at me, and she whispered so loud that the microphone caught it: "Pastor, is it almost over?" Now, I wasn't sure if it was about my homily, or the entire ceremony, but I would come to learn later it was about the whole ceremony.

There was this beautiful bride in a beautiful gown in the midst of all the glory of the wedding, most important day of her life, but she wanted it to be over with as soon as possible, and I would find out later why. Because she was so afraid that something was going to go wrong! She wanted to rush through it, and I thought to myself, 'What about everything that went right?' Here she was in the midst of this ceremony, and she missed so much.

Many of us are like that bride. We just rush through life, and we miss so many important things. I mean, our culture is so fast-paced that we have a new measurement of time. Ever heard of this, the honk-a-second? It's the distance, the time between the light turning green, and then someone behind you honking on their horn. Anybody know about that? I was driving one day in Lakeland, Florida, many years ago, and I was at a light, and I'm sure I was contemplating something very holy sitting there as Whitesnake and Van Halen were on my radio. Unbeknownst to me, the light turned green. A honk-a-second later, the guy behind me in a big truck, there's a lot of them in Polk County, lay on his horn. I was like, 'Oh, okay.'

I woke up, I went forward. This truck was tailgating me. Oh my gosh, it finally went around, and I noticed, I kid you not, a bumper sticker on his truck that read: Honk if you

love Jesus, and I thought to myself, 'That guy has to be the holiest, the most divine person in Polk County.'

Of course, it did remind me of another bumper sticker; listen closely: "Tithe if you love Jesus, anybody can honk." Now that'll preach, but everything is so fast isn't it? We're all in a rush these days. We have faster internet, faster cars, faster food. I read somewhere that, you know, when it comes to websites, if it doesn't download within one point five seconds, we just leave the website. What? One point five seconds? And we have all these things, faster this, faster that, and the question is, do we have more time? Heck no. We have less time, and more stress. In fact, sociologists have done studies studying texting, and emailing, and voicemail, and all the things that are supposed to save time, and they've discovered it does not save us time. Speed kills.

Chuck Swindoll is a great Christian writer and preacher, and he talked about the time when he was in a point in his life where he was just irritable, and curt with everybody, because he was just rushing around all the time missing so much. 'I gotta do this at church, I gotta do this at church, it's gotta be right, I gotta go to this meeting, I gotta go to that meeting', and rush, and rush, and rush.

And one night he was eating dinner with his little daughter, and he was rushing through that, and she sat at the table, and said, "Daddy, daddy. I got to tell you something, but I promise I'll say it really, really quickly." He said, "Sweetheart, you can tell me, but you know, say it slowly," and she said, "Okay daddy, but then listen slowly." And a little child shall lead them. Some of us need to do that. Listen slowly, not only to other people, but to God. How fast are you going?

Why are we so rushed? Why are we so busy? I think one of the biggest reasons is we think we're noble. How are you doing, and our favorite answer is, "Oh, I'm so busy. I'm just busy, busy, busy, busy, busy. Look how important I am, I'm just so busy." Yeah, you're so busy, you're distracted, and you're missing so much. Some people think in their mind that they're busy, busy, busy, busy like, "Look what all I have done," and I think, 'Look at all that you have missed.' I mean, you may have thought that taking that phone call in the middle of your son's baseball game was the wise thing to do, but you missed him coming to the plate, and getting that double. You may think that it's okay as you do your carpool, that you kind of go in your own mind, and you don't listen to your kids as they want to tell you about school, but you'll never get that time alone with them again. Maybe you think it's just what you do when you're eating dinner at home, or anywhere with your spouse just scrolling through your phone, and texting, and going through Facebook, and then you wonder why you're in a counselor's office three months later saying, "We don't have any intimacy anymore, where's the connection?" You

may think that it's okay to skip worship so you can get more done at home, or at work, or skip your devotional time, but then a little while later you're asking yourself, 'I don't really feel very close to God. Where has He been in my life?' Speed kills.

Abba Anthony was a wise father; he lived in the desert. I never thought that was wise, but I guess he was wise, and a curious man once approached Anthony, because he'd heard so much about this great desert father, and he asked, he said, "Father Anthony, what must want do to please God?"

And he said three things, and the first two were kind of obvious. He said, "Always be aware of God's presence, and always obey God's word," but the third one came out of nowhere when he said this: "Wherever you find yourself, do not easily leave."

Oh, I know some of us need to hear that today. We're rushing 90 to nothing, thinking the grass is always greener. Tomorrow is better than today, but one thing I've learned, folks, is God has something to teach us at every chapter of our lives, God has something to teach us at every season of our lives, God has something to reveal to us every day of our lives. Slow down.

When it comes to being guided by God, that's one of the things I've learned. In my life, I've been guilty of it, I have to slow down, because God will not compete with busyness or noise. Well, there's another thing that I've learned when it comes to being guided by God, and really experiencing that, which seems painfully obvious, but it needs to be said. God knows best. Did you know that?

Now, that's easy to believe on Sunday morning, isn't it? In all of our glory today with all the music, and the prayers, we're feeling good. Yes. God almighty knows best, but Monday to Saturday, sometimes we know best, right? And we make poor decisions out of it. 'Oh, that friend of mine, I got mad at her. I just cussed her out, and I'm going to get a new one.' 'Got in a fight with my spouse, I'm going to call up the divorce attorney today.' 'I don't like the way I look. I'll just get plastic surgery.'

A lady had a heart attack, and was rushed to the hospital. On the operating table she had a near-death experience, and was face to face with God Almighty, and she said, "God, is this it God? Is this it?" He said, "No, you have 30 more years to live." So when she woke up, she said, "Okay, while I'm here I want a tummy tuck. I want liposuction, I want a face lift. I want somebody to change my hair color, too, in the hospital." She said, "I never liked the way I look, and have 30 more years, so I'm going to take advantage of it." So finally, she walked out of the hospital—a new person, she thought. She walked across the street, and was struck, and

killed by an ambulance, and there she is before God again, and said, "God, I thought you told me I had 30 more years," and God said, "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you." I'll tell you, when we take matters into our own hands, dumb things happen to us.

When we think we have it all figured out, and we make decisions out of that, and forget there is a higher power that wants to guide us, oh we can get in trouble; but see, it's so hard to get into that place, because our culture worships the God of rugged individualism. 'Go ahead, make my day.' You go to any bookstore, you'll find a plethora of books on taking control, pulling your own strings. I guess to a certain extent that's okay at times, but the truth is this, being in control all the time is fine if you're not a Christian, but one of the biggest reasons why those of you who are here who follow Jesus Christ is because you said, "Christ, Shepherd, I can't do this without you. I can't manage life without you. I surrender to your will, and to your power, because I can't do this without you. I need your strength to raise my kids. I need your strength to get through work. I need your joy in my life. I need it. I give up control." So often we just take it back, and can do really foolish things.

Bishop Hugh McConnell was a great bishop many years ago, and when he retired, this would not be my idea of retirement, but he liked it. When he retired, he lived on a chicken farm. Whatever your fancy is, right? But he loved it. He loved to live on the land there on his chicken farm, and everything was great with him and his family, but one thing. When he first moved there about around 2:00 a.m. every night, one of the roosters would crow and wake everybody up. It was awful. It happened night, after night, after night, and finally McConnell was like, 'You know, I got to figure out what's going on', and so one night, he stayed up all night to figure out what was going on with this rooster, and this is what he figured out. Around 2:00 a.m., usually most nights a train would come around the bend, and shine its light on the chicken house, and the rooster, thinking it was the sun, would begin to crow.

Roosters aren't the only ones who often mistake headlights for dawns. Prisons are filled with people who mistook headlights for dawns. I talk to people as a pastor who have been devastated by life, because they were seeking the living among the dead.

One of my favorite texts in Proverbs says this, maybe you know this one: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not want. Rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your path." One of the things I've learned when it comes to being guided by the Shepherd, if you really want it, you have to realize that speed does kill, and God knows best, but maybe the most important thing I've learned, and I have to say this over and over again, I

believe as a pastor, especially in our culture of theology today, God is bigger than we think.

Can you say that? God is bigger than we think. We have to remind ourselves of that, because one of the things that disturbs me about theology in the church today is everybody thinks they have God in their back pocket. They have God all figured out. 'I have my system of theology.' 'Yes, this is what God would think.' 'This is what God would do.' How the heck do you know?

One of the things we've lost in the church is the mystery, and the wideness, and the massiveness of almighty God, 'cause I'll tell you this, if we could understand everything there was to understand about God, God would not be big enough to believe in, but that won't stop the church. Churches fight over worship styles as if there's only one way to worship God. Preachers will even fight over preaching styles, as if there's only one way to talk about God. Theologians have their systems of theology. 'Yes, this is how it works.' Are you that arrogant?

So often I see in people who come to me who want to be guided by the Shepherd but just seem stuck in life. Well, so often they are stuck because they have these preconceived ideas as to how God is supposed to work, how God is supposed to answer prayer, how God is supposed to respond. My gosh, I'm reminded this all the time. Ten months ago, I'd never thought I'd be here, that was off my radar. When you pray, and you seek guidance, you expand your idea of who God is, and how he's supposed to respond.

When we seek the guidance of the Shepherd, I think one of the things we have to do is say, "Lord, again not my will, but yours be done. I wash away all my preconceived ideas as to how this is supposed to work. I put away all my preconceived notions as to how you're supposed to respond. Lord, I surrender to you, guide me."

Meister Eckhart once said that the only hell we truly experience is what we refuse to let go of. What do you need to let go of to be guided by the Shepherd?

Riley Short was here several months ago, a mentor of mine, who baptized Paul, and he talked about the time when he went to Sweden with his family for a vacation, and they went to a children's zoo, and he says it was a great day, but something really peculiar happened. He said, "I noticed fairly often, kids would come with pacifiers in their mouth, and they would go to this pit, and drop their pacifier into the pit, then they would cry after it, after it left. One after the other, one after the other." He's like, "What in the world is going on here?"

So Riley went over to the pit, and he noticed there were hundred, and hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds of binkies on the ground, just laying there, and he's like, "I know our cultures are a little different, but this is weird," and so he found a zoo attendant that spoke English, and said, "I'm sorry. Excuse me. I have to ask, what in the world is this?" He said, "Oh sir, that's pacifier heaven." He said, "What?" "Yeah, that's a pacifier heaven. You see, in our community, when kids become of age when they really need to get rid of their binkies, they come here, and they let them go. Some cry, some are sad, but they know they need to let it go."

Sometimes, some of us hold on way too long to our pacifiers of faith wanting to be in control, or the idea that busyness will somehow lead us to a sense of meaning, or our ideas of God, our assumptions. If we truly want to be guided by the Shepherd in the right paths, we need to let them go.

Let us pray. Oh Lord, I pray for each, and every person in this sanctuary today. You know their hearts, you know the decisions they have to make in their lives. You know the stress that's on them. Oh Lord, by the power of your spirit, I ask that you would just slow them down, so they could be still, and know that you're God, and you're in control. Oh Lord, expand our horizons, expand our ideas of you. Forgive us when we put you in a box. Surprise us, oh Lord, with your grace and your love in ways we never thought of. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.



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