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Psalm 23:1–6, ESV

¹ *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

He leads me beside still waters.

³ *He restores my soul.*

*He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*

⁴ *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

⁵ *You prepare a table before me*

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me*

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

forever.

The carpet salesman.

A couple of summers ago, Wendy and I were in Turkey. There is an ancient church in Istanbul called the Hagia Sophia. It was built in the year 537 A.D., when the city was the eastern center of Christianity and was called Constantinople. It is

by far one of the largest of the ancient churches in the world. Interestingly, recently, Turkey has turned it into a mosque, and so it is no longer a museum that people can visit any time they want. It's not known whether or not the church will remain accessible to the public, and if so, under what restrictions. It's a stunning building. The inside is dominated by two levels of tall archways on either side, with a dome overhead and a dome over the altar. Eastern churches were often decorated with mosaics, and the image on the front of your bulletin this week is a photo I took of a very famous mosaic of Christ. It is on one of the interior walls of the Hagia Sophia. The name, by the way, means "Holy Wisdom", and its full name is the Holy Wisdom of Christ in God. In other words, the church was named after Jesus Christ. One day Wendy and I were on our way to see the Hagia Sophia. As we were walking along a street in Istanbul, a young man came walking up to us rapidly, a big smile on his face. He turned out to be a carpet salesman. Turkish carpets are a big thing in Turkey. They are made in remote, rural tribal areas, and the truly valuable ones are made by hand, and bear intricate, brightly colored designs. A rug for a medium sized living room might take a couple of women a couple of years to make and cost ten or twenty thousand dollars. But the Turkish economy has been in bad shape for several years, with a sharp decrease in tourism, first because of terrorist attacks there,

and also because of its authoritarian president locking up thousands of political opponents, and now because of the corona virus. At the time we were there, there were virtually no tourists, there had been a terrorist attack the day before we landed, and there was tremendous conflict between conservative Muslim backers of the president and more secular business people. The shops were almost empty and retail store owners were desperate. That's why there was a carpet salesman hanging around one of the biggest tourist sites in Istanbul, hoping to find older, American-looking people who might have the cash to buy a hand-made rug. He energetically gave us his plug, that he and his father owned a small three-story house packed with rugs and they were selling them for a fraction of their true value. He offered to take us there, give us free tea, and show us their rugs. When we declined, saying that we were going in to see the church, he pretty much begged us to consider coming and seeing the rugs. As politely as possible we told him that we were not interested and then reluctantly, he wished us a nice visit to the church. We went inside and I took a few hundred photographs. I will get back to this story.

Our Bible passage today comes from Psalms. We've looked at this Psalm before. It is extremely famous and certainly one of my favorites. We associate it with funerals and memorial services. There's more to this Psalm though, than

having no fear as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, something that seems fitting when saying goodbye to a loved one. The Psalm begins with comparing God to a shepherd. To fully appreciate that, we need to note that in the ancient world, good kings, ones who truly cared about their people, were known as the shepherds of their people. Thus, if we call the Lord our shepherd, we are saying that we are committed to living under God's reign. What the Psalm says is that if we accept God as our shepherd, if we agree that God is our king, we don't have to worry about needing anything. This promise from God evokes beautiful images of pastoral life. The Psalm communicates a sense of peace and tranquility. The Psalm's promise of comfort doesn't consist simply of vague imagery. For sheep – and remember the Psalm is about a shepherd and his sheep – being able to lie down in green pastures means to have food. To be beside still waters means to have enough to drink. To be in the right path means that danger is avoided. Importantly, it is the shepherd who ensures all of this. It is God who provides for us, on this earth and for eternity. While we associate it with funerals, the true purpose of the Psalm is to express confidence in our relationship with God, and in our belief that God will always be with us and will absolutely never abandon us. Psalm 23 wasn't even used broadly in funerals until the twentieth

century. It is actually a celebration of the true nature of a Christian life: an earthly life *devoted to God* and an eternal life *spent with God*.

Here's the line in the Psalm that is most relevant to my message today:
Surely, goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. What this says is that God pursues us. God isn't passive. God doesn't hang around on the perimeter of our lives, hoping we notice him and reach out. God puts the Holy Spirit within us. That is why we have the third member of the Trinity: The Holy Spirit is the active presence of God in our lives, something that we have to work very hard to ignore.

I'd like to get back to the story of the rug salesman. Wendy and I enjoyed visiting the ancient church. It was the most important thing that I wanted to see in Istanbul. But, when we came out of the church a few hours later, Wendy leaned toward me and said, "Look who's been waiting for us." Yes, the salesman was there, looking energetic and hopeful. He had waited there the entire time, just in the offhand chance that this one American couple might be encouraged to buy a rug from him. He was incredibly persistent and determined. It was actually a bit weird. We felt as if he had been stalking us. He strode up to us and once again asked us to please come to their shop and see the rugs. In truth, we were

thinking about buying a very small rug, to hang on our living room wall above the fireplace, and so we went ahead and accompanied him a block or so to their house-turned-shop. The house was tall and skinny, and made of wood that seemed to be rotting. The paint was largely peeled off. But, indeed, it was quite literally packed with thousands of rugs. Every room was piled with them. They were in rolls, in stacks, on shelves, and in closets. There was hardly any place to walk in the house. The place was an astonishing firetrap. He and his father did indeed serve us tea, and the only place to sit was on stacks of rugs. We looked at a number of rugs. We were the only customers in the shop, and we saw no other shoppers out on the street. In the end, we somewhat guiltily told them that no, we did not want to buy a rug.

God stalks us with the Holy Spirit, like a desperate, aggressive carpet salesman. Each and every one of us is as important to God as a single potential customer to a Turkish carpet salesman who hasn't had a viable customer in weeks or months. God not only doesn't give up easily. God never gives up at all.

You know, the Hagia Sophia was a mosque in the past. Constantinople fell in 1453, about nine hundred years after the Hagia Sophia was built. But it wasn't turned into a publicly accessible museum until 1934, five hundred years later. For

most of the rest of the time it was a mosque. As it turns out, Islam forbids religious images, so when it was a mosque, the Christian mosaics were covered with quotations from the Quran. The Muslims added minarets, tall narrow towers to the church, significantly changing its outside appearance. The minarets are used to call Muslims to prayer five times a day. A Muslim side altar, called a mihrab, was added inside the church. In short, its external and internal appearance was significantly altered in order to accommodate Muslim worship. Yet, five hundred years after it was taken over by Muslims, the church emerged, changed, but still quite recognizable. The mosaics were uncovered: you have an image of one on your bulletin. The Hagia Sophia was like God. The Hagia Sophia was like that carpet salesman working so hard to earn a bit of money to take care of his family. The Hagia Sophia did not give up. There is no reason to believe that the Muslims in Istanbul will aggressively remodel the Hagia Sophia. It is owned by the Turkish people. They have a right to do what they want with it. My hope is that one day, the Hagia Sophia will emerge again and it will be accessible as a church and visible as a church.

Wendy and I grew to deeply respect the people of Turkey. They are not responsible for the actions of their extremely oppressive president. They were a very hard-working people who were suffering economically because of extremists

who were setting off bombs in their cities and because their President was using a crackdown on secular business-people, academics and journalists to rally fundamentalist Muslims around him. In a country that was highly dependent upon tourist dollars, there were virtually no visitors. Now, the corona virus is further crushing the nation, and I believe that it is this pressure that is causing the President to turn the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque. He's trying once again to please the fraction of the population that support him, and these people are devout Muslims. That salesman was a good man. He treated us with respect. He was polite and friendly. He served us tea and showed us rug after rug. We both hope that he and his father and their family are all doing okay.

Remember that God is like the Hagia Sophia. God is like a desperate Turkish rug salesman. God is three Gods in one: God the Father who created us in God's image, God the son who brought us a personal relationship with God, and the Holy Spirit who sits inside of us, never leaving us alone for an instant. No matter where we go, what we do, or what we think, God is there, pursuing us. Please pray with me.

God, thanks for hounding us, stalking us, offering us cheap Turkish carpets no matter how hard we try to ignore you. Thanks for never changing, for being

like the Hagia Sophia, that remains your house, your temple, your home, your place of worship no matter what politically minded people do to it. God, you resist manipulation just like the Hagia Sophia. You also resist political manipulation just like the hard working business people of Turkey who fight to grow their nation, to earn a living, to care for their children, despite the way their leader uses his people to serve his personal purposes. God, keep after us. Follow us all the days of our lives so that we may live in your house today, tomorrow, and for eternity. Amen.