



Theme: Authentic Faith in a World of AI
"Waiting Patiently to be Found"

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber, January 24-25, 2026

VIDEO **Sermon Starter**

SLIDE **"Waiting Patiently to be Found"**

I want to start today by asking you a simple question.

SLIDE **Have you ever been really lost?**

I don't mean lost in terms of not knowing where you are on a map because in today's world most of us can use some sort of map on our phone and figure out where we are or where we need to be going. I'm talking about losing our way in life. Sometimes we get lost because of health issues. Sometimes we get lost because of trauma or grief. Sometimes we get lost in our marriages or with our kids. Sometimes we get lost in our profession. Sometimes we get lost on social media and we find ourselves doom scrolling until our brain falls out. My guess is that we can look back over our lives and most of us can see a place where we got lost and we wondered if we would ever find our way out of whatever trap or difficult situation in which we found ourselves.

Today we're gonna continue this series of sermons on artificial intelligence by talking about what we do when we get lost in an artificial

world. We have recognized in this series that the **world is changing rapidly**. What is clear, as I have been doing research and reading and listening for the past few months, is that **artificial intelligence is here to stay** and it is **going to dominate the world** in terms of our conversations over the next few years. I don't say this to **scare anyone** but simply to remind us of how fast the world is changing and how important it is for us as people of faith **not to bury our head in the sand** but instead ask what it means to be faithful during times of rapid change. This is why we're asking this basic question as part of this series of sermons.

SLIDE How can we have authentic faith in a world of artificial intelligence?

I want to remind us of a few things we've talked about already in this series. We began with an overview and we recognized that we don't need to live in fear because God has already won the victory through Jesus Christ and his work on the cross. Yes, there are challenges that we must face and deal with when it comes to any new technology, but we believe as followers of Jesus that he has overcome anything any technological advance will throw at us, including suffering, pain, and even death. That's why last week our focus was on how to find peace in a world where it feels anxiety and fear are overwhelming us. This has been an issue for every generation and it's important for us to stay grounded in our faith.

SLIDE We don't have to be afraid because God is with us.

SLIDE God gives us freedom to CHOOSE how to respond.

While we can't choose everything that is happening in the world, we can choose how to respond. If we care about our **kids or grandkids or the next generation**, then we need to be aware of what is happening in our world to the best of our ability. Then we must learn **how to respond and encourage others** in that response. That's why in these series we are talking about these things that we can do as people of faith as we navigate this current world that feels anxious and out of control.

SLIDE How do we live in an AI world? (fly in)

- **Read the Bible more and screens less.**
- **Make relationship with God and others primary, using AI to supplement.**
- **Seek wisdom from Scripture, God's Spirit, and godly companions.**
- **Invite God to help you discern truth from lies.**

SLIDE

- **Patiently wait on God rather than seek quick results generated by AI.**

There's a biblical idea I want us to focus on today, much like we focused on how we find peace last week, because it is central to what it means to follow Jesus. One of the reasons it's easy to get lost today is because of one of the risks that we have talked about when it comes to artificial intelligence and that is how much influence algorithms have over our lives. When I asked Google Gemini about the algorithms it creates, even the AI response was telling.

SLIDE “We know the problem with algorithms. We know they reinforce our biases, perhaps unconsciously. Rather than broadening our perspectives, they narrow them, perhaps dangerously.” –Google Gemini

Let's listen to **Prof. Yuval Noah Harari**, bestselling author, historian, and public intellectual who specializes in macro-historical questions. A professor at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Harari is known for his thought-provoking perspectives on human history. His work explores consciousness, free will, intelligence, and happiness, and considers the potential consequences of a future where intelligent biological organisms are surpassed by their own creations.

VIDEO The power and danger of algorithms.

Here's how I think we get lost because of the algorithms created

by artificial intelligence. When we are on our phone or doing any sort of search even on a streaming service, whatever we watch is considered and then an algorithm feeds us things that are like that repeatedly. The more we watch a certain perspective on news or a certain television show, the more similar shows and perspectives are given to us. Before too long, our world shrinks like being in a box where each wall moves in with each new recommendation. It does not take long for us to get lost in a world that is small and narrow. When the box closes in, we can't even turn around and we are stuck. We can't see anything except for what we have been feeding ourselves and as a result we can easily get depressed or discouraged.

SLIDE “Lost in the Algorithms”

I was going to title this sermon, “Lost in the Algorithms,” But I discovered after doing some research that there already was a musical group by this name and there was an article by George Kalantzis who also used this title. The subtitle of George's article is **“*The Story Of A Digital Writer’s Life.*”** I found his words about the digital world of algorithms especially profound as I was thinking about this message this weekend.

SLIDE “It’s a world where my pen has been replaced by a keyboard, and my notebook by a screen. Here, the algorithms are the new gods, deciding which tales see the light of day and which languish in the unseen corners of the internet.” –George Kalantzis

The truth is that all of us have used algorithms most of our lives, even before the digital age came upon us. We all choose what to let in and what to keep out when it comes to things happening in our world around us or people in our lives. The challenge is that now that has gone into hyperdrive with artificial intelligence, and it is something else which is often telling us what to let in and what to keep out. As a result, our world becomes narrow and we can often miss out on the beauty of

the variety, and the creation God has given to us.

One of the reasons that Jesus got in trouble was because he hung out with people who the religious leaders thought rabbis should not hang out with. Jesus spent time with people outside of the algorithm that religious leaders had created and their world had become pretty small and isolated and they were missing out on what God intended for them. I would suggest that sometimes, much like the religious leaders of Jesus day, we only read parts of the Bible that we're comfortable with and that creates an algorithm where we miss out on the variety and the beauty of the scriptures.

We also can easily forget as followers of Jesus that we are meant to view everything in our world and everything we read in the scriptures through the lens of the algorithm of the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Too often we let other things become the algorithm that sets the tone for our hearts, and it causes all kinds of damage. The apostle Paul gives us some powerful words to combat the algorithms that create a small world in our heads and that keep us from seeing the world the way Christ did. One of the places is in his letter to the Philippians, chapter 2, where he writes these words which were an early hymn in the church that they would sing as a way of remembering who they were in the midst of the algorithm of the Greek culture which was very self-centered and probably not unlike much of what we experienced today.

BIBLE

1 Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? ² Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.

³ Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Don't look out

only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

⁵ You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

**⁶ Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.**

**⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.**

When he appeared in human form,

**⁸ he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.**

I want to suggest to you that this is meant to be part of our algorithm that beats inside of our hearts and it is meant to be a gift from Jesus which shows us the way to life. It is the opposite of what most artificial intelligence algorithms do, which is try to convince us that the world is all about us and what we want. The irony is that this was part of the first algorithm that the serpent whispered to Adam and Eve in the first story in our Bible. Remember the serpent tried to convince them that they could have whatever they wanted and they could be God and it could all be about them.

What's interesting is that Jesus understood that this would happen to all of us and that sometimes we would find ourselves lost in the wrong algorithm. He told stories about this and I would suggest these are some of the most important stories that Jesus would tell. They capture a theme of the life and ministry of Jesus that again is meant to be part of our algorithm as we seek to follow Jesus. These are stories that many of us have heard and I think most of us get deep in our hearts because they are so profound. We find them in the gospel of Luke, chapter 15, which contains several stories about lost things. The context of these stories is critical so these first 2 verses are important to understanding the point Jesus is trying to make.

BIBLE

1 Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ² This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

³ So Jesus told them this story: ⁴ “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. ⁶ When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!

I think if Jesus were telling the parable of the lost sheep today, he would be talking about cats or dogs and not sheep. In Jesus day, everybody raised sheep from the time they were kids. Today, most of us don't raise sheep but we do have pets. Which of you, if your dog or cat ran away, wouldn't go put up “lost” signs on every street in your neighborhood and go searching from street to street? You might put it on Facebook or a lost animal website or go to the Humane Society. You would do whatever it took to find your animals and bring them back home, wouldn't you?

I found myself remembering times when we had dogs who have run away. It seems like every dog we have ever owned has some wanderlust and liked to do life on their own sometimes. Most recently we were walking at the top of Durango hills above our house when our littlest dog Jasper, a 6 1/2 LB papillon, became separated from us and wandered off. You would think as little as he is he would be easy to keep track of, but he is blind and deaf but his nose works, and it sometimes takes him to the wrong places, and he loses track of us. If we're not paying attention to him, he'll look up from one of his sniffing

adventures and then begin running in the wrong direction to try and find us.

On this occasion when he got lost in the woods, we looked for him for hours until it got dark and we couldn't find him. We went to bed thinking he was for sure a goner because he was so small and there are bears and mountain lions and other critters who no doubt would find him an enticing meal. It was much to our surprise that I got a text in the morning from one of our staff members Jenny who leads us in music sometimes that she wondered if we had lost Jasper because she thought she saw a picture of him on the Durango lost pets Facebook page.

GRAPHIC Jasper on Facebook

It turns out he had wandered down the hill back towards our house but didn't get too far before he found someone's shed and triggered a motion light. The owners came out and found him wandering around and brought him inside and gave him food and water and listed him online so that someone might find him. We went to pick him up and he was pretty happy where he was, so he wasn't in too big of a hurry to go with me. I think they may have treated him better than we did at home. We were grateful to the homeowners who found Jasper, and we took them out to dinner to a place of their choice. They chose Pop Sushi. I tell you that story because if you ever want your pastor to take you out for a nice dinner, all you need to do is rescue one of my animals! I can hardly hear some of you in your head scheming how you might steal Jasper but if you do, we may just let you keep him so don't get your hopes up.

We just finalized a new date for trip to the Holy Land we'll be taking in February of 2027. If you go with us, you will see they still have sheep and shepherds all throughout the country. I have shared with you before that on one of our previous trips I asked our tour guide if he would stop at some point so I could interview a shepherd to share with

our congregation back home. We were driving through Samaria when our guide had the driver pull the bus over because there were a shepherding family and a bunch of sheep on the side of the road. He kind of caught me unprepared, but we dashed out to meet his family. You see a picture of their sheep here on the video screen.

GRAPHIC **Mohamed Sheep in Samaria**

VIDEO **Jeff and Mohammed 2**

GRAPHIC **Jeff and Mohammed**

Unfortunately, we had technical difficulties, and the battery ran out in the middle of the interview and so you didn't get to hear the whole thing. Our guide was speaking to Mohammed in Arabic and explaining to him who I was and that I wanted to ask him some questions about being a Shepherd. Our guide was translating back and forth until finally Mohammed looked at me and said, "I speak English."

As you heard, I discovered that Mohammed had 121 sheep and he and his family took care of them. I asked him if he knew if he was missing a sheep and he said, "Of course I do. What kind of shepherd you think I am?"

So, I asked him if a sheep was missing, would he go and look for that sheep. He told me, "No, I would send my dog."

I asked him what would happen if the dog didn't bring the sheep back. Would he go and get the sheep himself? He said to me very matter-of-factly, "No, I would get a new dog."

GRAPHIC **Sheep eating**

You notice that in this picture most of the sheep are eating and this is very common because this is basically what they do. They graze on this land and eat those small plants that you can see in the picture. There are shepherds and Bedouins primarily in the southern and central part of the country. Many of them live in what we would call the Judean wilderness. When Jesus places this parable in context he says,

“If one of you has 100 sheep and one of them wanders away, wouldn't you leave the 99 in the wilderness and go find that one lost sheep and bring a back home?”

GRAPHIC Bedouin shepherd and sheep

GRAPHIC Bedouin Camp

GRAPHIC Judean wilderness

I want you to be clear what this looks like. Above you see shepherd camps that we drove by on several occasions that are in the Judean wilderness. This is what the area looks like not far from Mohammed and near where we saw many of the shepherds and their camps. The hillsides were often covered with sheep and when they are grazing, they take them all over these hills. The ravine down below would have been called in David's Psalms, “the Valley of the shadow of death.” Notice how this area all looks the same and might feel overwhelming

When you read in this story about one of the sheep getting lost outside in the wilderness, this is what it looked like. Then you must decide if you will go look for the sheep or will you let it try to survive on its own in the wilderness, which probably won't happen even for a night. Of course, this parable is not really about sheep and shepherds but it's about God and it's about us. The truth is that we share some similarities with those sheep. One of the similarities is that sheep are social creatures. They have a herd mentality, and they tend the flock together because it keeps them safe.

One of the challenges for sheep however is that while they prefer to be with the flock, and they like having a Shepherd, because it makes them feel safe as he leads them beside still waters and takes them to greener pastures, they also struggle with something that we struggle with as humans.

The grass is always greener on the other side of the pasture.

Mohammed told me that this is how it is with a sheep. No matter how green the grass is in the area where he has the sheep, one of those sheep is always going to be right there at the edge and they will eventually wander off in search of better food which they never really find. The sheep will wander off, not really meaning to, but always thinking that they will find better food over there in the other direction.

Many of us spend much of our lives wishing we could be someone else or somewhere else or with someone else or doing something else or living someplace else. That's the mentality of the sheep.

Here's another truth about sheep that applies to us. Mohammed told me that while sheep prefer to be in a flock, they literally will **nibble their way into trouble**. They don't mean to get lost, and they don't want to leave the flock, but they nibble here and they nibble there and they nibble a little bit further away and then finally, hours later, they realize they are all alone. They can't see the other sheep, and they can't see the Shepherd. **They begin bleating** and there is no one to come and rescue them.

Many of us have slowly wandered away from God. We have nibbled our way lost, slowly and sometimes inch by inch. We finally look up from our nibbling, and we ask ourselves this question that we started the sermon with, **“How did I get here? How did I get so lost?”**

I was meeting recently with a member of our church who had not attended for a while. They told me they had gotten sick several months ago and couldn't come to church. They got better but they still didn't come to church. Instead, they found themselves spending more time scrolling on their phone. It eventually led them to some pornographic sites and then they got consistent ads and recommendations for more shady sites. They told me that after a while they forgot what the voice of the Shepherd, the voice of God, sounded like. They forgot how comforting his voice was. Then one day their life became a mess, and he asked himself the question, “How did I get so lost?”

That's what we find happens with sheep when they get lost. They don't mean to get lost. Part of this parable is about sheep that wander away. Why did it wander away? Most of the time it just nibbles its way lost.

Mohammed shared with me that when a sheep would nibble its way lost it could be deadly. In the holy land in the time of Jesus there were five major predators: mountain lions, cheetahs and leopards which no longer exist in that area today. In Jesus' day people like the apostle Paul often equated the devil or Satan to a lion which was seeking to devour. This was a common understanding of what would happen to a sheep if you wandered away, so it was a great metaphor as the apostles talked about the danger of wandering off by yourself away from God.

The two predators which were prevalent in Jesus' day and are still prevalent today are the spotted hyena and the desert wolf. Many years ago, our family got to see a spotted hyena up close at a park down by Flagstaff called Out of Africa. The trainer even made a hyena laugh, and I thought you might like to see that.

VIDEO Hyena Laughing

GRAPHIC Spotted Hyena in Israel

GRAPHIC Desert Wolf Eats Sheep

You can see the desert wolf in this photograph where he is eating a sheep. These packs of wolves and hyenas are out there waiting for a sheep to nibble its way lost so it can be devoured. I told our guide Michael that I would love to come back to the holy land sometime and hike and maybe even backpack from the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem. He told me I could do that, but I would do it without him. He said he wouldn't camp out at night in the wilderness. He told me I could stay in a tent by myself if I wanted, but he was afraid of the wolves and other predators that live in the wilderness of Judea.

Jesus talked about people who would lead people astray from God and he called them wolves in sheep's clothing. These metaphors are meant to help us recognize the dangers that can happen when you are a sheep and you wander off by yourself. You find yourself lost and sometimes devoured. Isaiah the prophet captured the same idea, and you might remember it from Handel's Messiah where he quotes Isaiah 53:6.

BIBLE

⁶ All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own.

I found myself thinking about these algorithms that can lead us astray. We can nibble our way lost on social media or websites or shopping or pornography. Don't forget that when Jesus is telling us these parables he is telling us our story, because all of us have wandered off at some point in our lives. It may have been when we were teenagers and we pushed God away. It may have been when something tragic happened in our lives and we felt God let us down and we pushed God away. Maybe we just nibbled our way lost by losing focus and getting caught up in the worries and struggles and politics of this world. All of us have been lost and we can still find ourselves lost in the future if we are not paying attention to the voice of the Shepherd.

It's important to remember the context of this parable. Jesus has been ministering to sinners and tax collectors. They are drawn to him, and Jesus understands himself to be a Shepherd who is reaching out to these lost sheep. The religious leaders who are in my profession as well as those who are deeply committed to God in the first century are watching this and they begin to get upset because Jesus is spending so much time with prostitutes and sinners and tax collectors. We read that in the opening line of Luke 15.

BIBLE

1 Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen

to Jesus teach. 2 This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

SLIDE Jesus befriended them!

The Greek word for “associating with” is to “befriend.” Remember that the religious people had this idea that what God wanted was to be pure and holy. They believed God wanted them to distance themselves as much as possible from sin which meant not associating with sinful people. Jesus is not distancing himself from sin, however. He's eating with sinners and becoming friends with those who were seen as unclean. As a response to their grumbling, Jesus looks at them and he tells them this parable and asks them if they would rejoice over one that was lost but now is found. Wouldn't you rejoice?

For the religious leaders, the answer was, “No, if that sheep wanders off, it gets what it deserves. I have 99 sheep over here and I'm going to cut my losses. I'm not going to go out where the wolves are at the end of the day and search high and low, in the Valley of the shadow of death, to find that one lost sheep who was stupid and nibbled his way away.”

That is likely the answer that would've been given by the religious leaders and we know this because it is how they lived their lives and what Jesus talked about on a regular basis. They looked at people who had nibbled their way lost and they didn't care. They didn't focus on trying to reach out to them or befriend them or welcome them back home. They focused on making sure the 99 were comfortable. It was all about the 99 and not the lost sheep. For Jesus, it was just the opposite. It was all about the lost sheep.

I want to be clear that Jesus cared about the 99, but he was really interested in trying to find that one lost sheep and bring it back home. Throughout the Bible we find that God is the chief shepherd and Jesus came to embody God as Shepherd. Throughout the Scriptures however,

God also called human beings to shepherd one another. Parents are to shepherd their children. Religious leaders are to shepherd those who aren't religious yet. We find ways to reach out to those who have wandered away or who just feel lost and broken and we seek to care for them and draw them back to God.

The word “pastor” is literally translated to the word shepherd. This was the role of the religious leaders, to draw people back to the Good Shepherd. But the religious leaders in this story who were surrounding Jesus had forgotten their role. This is a constant problem for religious leaders. 560 years before Jesus, Ezekiel says this in chapter 34 about shepherds:

BIBLE

1 Then this message came to me from the Lord: ² “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign Lord: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn’t shepherds feed their sheep? ³ You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. ⁴ You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. ⁵ So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. ⁶ They have wandered through all the mountains and all the hills, across the face of the earth, yet no one has gone to search for them.

The religious leaders had failed to care for the sick and bind up the wounded, to bring back the strays or to search for the lost. One of our driving passions if we are truly to be Jesus Christ to the world is to seek out those who are lost and to love them back to God. This is meant to be part of our mission as we seek to be the presence of Jesus

Christ in the world. This is what drove who Jesus was and he came to strengthen the weak, bind up the injured, and search for the strays and bring them back home. This is part of what should drive us as people of faith and if it's not, then we need to remember and we need to care.

This is why we ask those of you who are committed members of this church to park farther away and leave the closer spaces for guests who might be lost sheep trying to find their way home. Many of you chose to come to worship on Christmas Eve instead of on Christmas Eve at 3 or 5, when you would rather have come to worship. Several of you told me that you wanted to make sure there were enough seats for people and so you and your family chose to come in at a different time. We still ran out of room at 3 and 5, and maybe next year we'll try to find another way to make more space for the those who were trying to find their way home on Christmas Eve can do that. Jesus tells us this story to remind us as Shepherds that we are to care about those who have nibbled away from God.

GRAPHIC Judean Wilderness Sunset

We have talked about the sheep, and we've talked about the wolves and so now let's look at the shepherd who is the chief shepherd, which is God. I want to remind you again of what that wilderness looks like where the shepherd must go to find that one lost sheep. It's becoming dark and there are mountain lions and hyenas and desert wolves lurking. Jesus tells us that the kind of God we serve goes into these places, searching relentlessly for us. Even when we wander away,

God is still searching and calling out our names in the dark, even when we are lost in an algorithm or some other stressor of life. God is calling out to us to return and come back home. Jesus takes up this same metaphor in John's gospel, chapter 10 where he says these words.

BIBLE

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they

know me, ¹⁵ just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.

I find it interesting that sheep are relatively smart animals, even though we say they're dumb. As mammals go, they are just below pigs and about equal to cows in terms of IQ, which is relatively high as mammals go. Sheep can be trained to know their names and so if you are a shepherd training a sheep it will respond to its name when you call it. Sheep also learn to know the shepherd's voice, and it won't come to the call of someone else. It will come when it recognizes its shepherd's voice. Sheep also can recognize facial expressions and recognize when their shepherd is happy and when their Shepherd is sad by looking at their shepherd's face. This is why Jesus said, "My sheep know my voice, and I called them by name and they come to me."

GRAPHIC Shepherd carrying sheep

I love the picture that Jesus gives us at the end of this parable. You've seen pictures like this one of a Shepherd with a sheep around their necks. Jesus says that when he finds one of the sheep this is what he does. Shepherds bind or hold the feet of the sheep together around their neck and the sheep then relax on the shepherd's shoulders. There is this picture of God seeking after us and when he finally finds us, God takes us in his arms and put us on the shoulders, so we are safe once more. He carries us when we can't carry ourselves. This is why Jesus says that the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

This is a profound and staggering idea. The shepherd is willing to face the lions and the wolves and the algorithms to save his sheep. When Jesus came to be the good shepherd for us, he lays down his life. From the cross, he shows us how he takes the anger and hatred of the wolves and lions and says, "This is how much I love you. Come back little lambs. Come back." He lays down his life for his sheep when we

are lost in the digital wilderness.

This parable is about the relentless love of God who is willing to lay down his life to bring the flock to safety. Jesus doesn't tell us to "earn it" as he's hanging on the cross. He just says, "Remember me – remember how much your shepherd loves you. You can live free and differently. You don't have to live the prisons of your past, or a digital prison."

One last image from this parable is that the lost sheep is sometimes the one who gets into trouble. Maybe you were that lost sheep in your family who rebelled. Maybe you are the lost child who left home. Remember that the story of the lost son is simply a retelling of this story of the sheep several verses later in the same chapter of Luke's gospel. What's interesting is that Jesus came looking for the sheep who didn't fit in and who wondered off. He saw them as treasured and valuable and loveable. No matter how unfortunate their lives were, no matter how messed up things became in their lives, he looked at these people with love and said, "You are my friends."

Marianne Bird was born with multiple birth defects. She had a cleft palate. She was deaf in one ear. She had a disfigured face and lopsided feet. As she was growing up, she said the worst thing in life wasn't all the disabilities. The worst thing was the torment that she got at school from the other children. She was teased and mocked. The worst day of the entire year for her was the day they gave hearing tests to all the children. When I was a kid they did these tests individually, but Marianne lived in a time when they did it for the whole class all at once. The teacher would ask every pupil to come and stand in front of the class, and they would whisper something in their ears and the child would repeat what they heard.

Marianne recalled that every year, when the teacher would whisper something in her ear, she couldn't understand or make out what the teacher said, but she was forced to recite whatever she

thought she heard. She would recite the words that she thought she heard and all the other children would giggle and laugh at her. She was the girl whose face was disfigured and couldn't understand plain English.

Finally, she was in a class with one of the best teachers in the school. Her name was Ms. Leonard. She said that Ms. Leonard had called all the children forward to do the hearing test and when it was her turn, she was terrified as usual. She was waiting for the ridicule that would happen once again like it had every other year. Usually, teachers would whisper in her ear things like, "The sky is blue," and then she would have to repeat that. They might say something like, "You have new shoes," and she would repeat that phrase.

Marianne said that she had come forward and Ms. Leonard leaned into her good ear to whisper something to her. She didn't whisper, "You have new shoes," or "The sky is blue." These are the words that Marianne wrote about that experience.

I waited for those words but the words which she spoke were the words that God must have put in her mouth, and on her heart. The seven words she whispered in my ear that day changed my life. She whispered, "I wish you were my little girl."

When I heard those words, someone who actually wanted me and loved me, it changed everything.

The shepherd is whispering. When we are in the digital wilderness of life, or going through life's challenges that seem overwhelming, or when we feel isolated and alone, the shepherd is calling your name and saying, "I wish you were my little girl. I wish you were my little boy. You are my little lamb. Come home. Come home."

I want to end by inviting you to join me in reciting the words that King David wrote as a Shepherd boy when he reflected on the relationship he had with God. They start off as a confession of faith and then they turn into a prayer. We read these words at funerals because

they bring us comfort and peace. I invite you to say this out loud as we remember the words to the 23rd Psalm in the King James Version.

BIBLE

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 forever.

Let's pray...

SLIDE Prayer

The Good Shepherd is calling your name. He's saying, "Come home a little lamb, come home." I would invite you in your own words to simply say something like this...

Be my shepherd oh God, and I will be one of your lambs.

Help me to know your voice and follow where you lead.

I love you oh God, thank you for loving me.

Recognizing that we are not only sheep but we are called to be shepherds, to reach out to the lost and bind up the broken and strengthen the weak, would you simply say something like this.

Lord, use me and help me to see the people around me as you see them...

Help me to bring back the strays and search for the lost...

Oh God, I thank you for the great privilege of being an earthly shepherd in this community. I pray you will help us as a church to never forget that we are called to care for the lost sheep, the weak, the wounded, the hurt, and the broken. May we always see people as you see them. Lord, we thank you that you are our Good Shepherd and we are your lambs. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

January 24-25, 2026, Order

1. Maddie welcomes people.
2. Song: "Firm Foundation"
3. Song: "Goodness of God"
4. Jeff welcomes people:
 - a. QR Code and Connect Card
 - b. Invite people to greet each other, however comfortable and be seated.
5. Jeff Introduces announcement video
6. Announcement Video
7. Sermon
8. Prayer
9. Meditation Moments
10. Offering (Bibles, Journals, and Devotionals)
11. Song: "Worthy of It All"
12. Caring Ministers
13. Welcome Center and Wesley Commons
14. Prayer Quilt for...
15. Closing Prayer