

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, April 25, 2021**

**“Shall Follow Me”
Psalm 23**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

What chases you? Day in, day out—what is it that haunts you and hounds you? What is it that you can't get away from, no matter how hard you try? What is it that you can't shake, that catches up to you late at night or in your moments of weakness? What threatens to catch you and capture you even now? Pause and consider that a moment...

Don't worry: I'm not going to ask you to volunteer your answers! (You're probably quite relieved to be muted right now.) But I wonder if perhaps you thought of worries or anxieties: these days, there's much indeed that can make us anxious and worried. Or perhaps you thought of some regrets: opportunities missed, mistakes made—the coulda beens and shoulda beens. The answers go on, in all their variety...but whatever came to mind, remember that as we now reflect on our Psalm in Unison.

Psalm 23 is often very familiar—perhaps even too familiar. One of the problems with reading Psalm 23 is that we think we know what it's about, so we don't listen as closely as we might. If I asked you, “What's Psalm 23 about?”—you might say something like, “God's the Shepherd; we're the sheep; we follow the Shepherd.” And that would reflect at least *part* of the psalm, especially the portion I addressed in the Word to the Children...but—sheep following the Shepherd—is that really what Psalm 23 is *all* about? Look again at the psalm: do sheep often sit at “table” in the presence of their sheep “enemies”? Have you ever seen a sheep drink from an overflowing cup? The initial image in this psalm is the divine Shepherd and the sheep that follow, but that image is not all there is to this rich and complex psalm.

There's a turn—a change—in this psalm, that took me years to notice, and it's about *who* is following *whom*. The psalm opens with the language of the Shepherd leading and the sheep following:

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He *makes me lie down* in green pastures;

he *leads me* beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He *leads me in right paths* for his name's sake” (vv. 1-3).

The psalmist, with this imagery of the sheep following the shepherd, sings of following the God who leads...

Yet, later in the psalm, as images of sheep and shepherd become less apparent, notice what's doing the following:

“Surely goodness and mercy *shall follow me*
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long” (v. 6)—

“Surely goodness and mercy *shall follow me.*”

The psalmist begins by singing of following God the Shepherd, but then sings of God's “goodness and mercy” following the psalmist.

And indeed, it's more than just “following.” The word we have here, “follow”—that's a traditional translation (it's the same word you'd find in the old King James). But in the original language, in Hebrew, the word is stronger and fiercer than just ‘follow.’ The word (רָדַף) can mean ‘run after,’ ‘pursue,’ ‘chase,’ ‘put to flight,’ ‘dog,’ ‘persecute,’ even ‘harass’ (B-D-B). It's a verb that usually describes “the hostile actions of enemies” (N.E.T.): it's the same word that describes the Pharaoh's army pursuing the Israelites (Exodus 14:4); it's the word used when Saul pursues David (1 Samuel 23:28); it's the same word the psalmist uses elsewhere when praying for God's help against pursuing enemies (7:1).

And what is it, exactly, that's pursuing and chasing the psalmist so doggedly? God's “goodness and mercy.” This is the only place in the Old Testament where that threatening word about chasing is connected to God's “goodness and mercy,” as the “goodness and mercy” of God here take the place of enemies in pursuit (N.E.T.). ‘Goodness’ here describes “the benefit of blessing” (Mays), the goodness of God that touches down into our lives; and ‘mercy’ here describes God's lovingkindness—but with a richness that's hard to express. It's about “the reliable helpfulness of the LORD to any and all who are dependent on him” (Mays), as one scholar puts it: some have translated the word as “loyal love” (Mays), “steadfast love” (Byassee), or even “steady love” (Davis). Another scholar, recognizing how limited all these options may be, writes: “The best the preacher can do is note the feebleness of English-speakers' efforts and fill the word with biblical content: God will be faithful to the covenant however unfaithful we, God's human partners, may be” (Byassee). So, when we hear “goodness and mercy,” we could perhaps think of the blessing of God and the faithfulness of God, God's kindness and God's grace.

So, says the psalmist, the “goodness and mercy” of God—God's blessing and faithfulness—are pursuing and chasing...but when? When does this happen? According to our psalm, God's “goodness and mercy” pursue the psalmist not occasionally or intermittently—but persistently and relentlessly: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me *all the days of my life*” (v. 6). For the psalmist, there can never come a moment when this goodness and mercy could be outmaneuvered: as one theologian puts it, the psalmist's “entire life [will] be beset by goodness and grace” (Charry).

And this morning, as we hear the psalmist's confidence that God's "goodness and mercy" are in pursuit, this psalm invites us to affirm that God's "goodness and mercy" likewise pursue *us*. As this psalm becomes our prayer, we may delight in the persistent pursuit of God's kindness and grace. Goodness and mercy aren't just following us: we're hunted by goodness and mercy; goodness and mercy are tracking our every move; goodness and mercy have picked up our scent; goodness and mercy are breathing down our necks. As my colleague, Richard Topping, has put it: "The twin hounds of goodness and mercy are hot on our trail!" And, according to the psalmist, this is our inevitable fate, "all the days of my life": escape is not an option, as—every moment—God's goodness and mercy are closer to catching us.

And this is particularly good to hear, since we are perhaps more likely to flee from—than to—the blessing of God. Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a "rabbi [who] once asked a prominent member of his congregation, 'Whenever I see you, you're always in a hurry. Tell me, where are you running all the time?' The man answered, 'I'm running after success, I'm running after fulfillment, I'm running after the reward for all my hard work.' The rabbi responded, 'That's a good answer if you assume that all those blessings are somewhere ahead of you, trying to elude you and if you run fast enough, you may catch up with them. But isn't it possible that those blessings are behind you, that they are looking for you, and the more you run the harder you make it for them to find you?'" He adds, "Isn't it possible indeed that God has all sorts of wonderful presents for us—[...] flowers budding in the spring and leaves turning in the fall—but we in our pursuit of happiness are so constantly on the go that [God] cannot find us [...] to deliver them?" We might flee from God under the bankrupt assumption that we can secure some deeper blessing apart from God, yet—according to our psalm—it's the extraordinary kindness of God that, though we flee, God's goodness and mercy still pursue us and do not let us go.

This psalm perhaps enables us to realize that—in seeking God—we do not so much pursue the divine one who evades us, but rather we relent as God wears us down and captures us with God's "goodness and mercy." I'm reminded of that hymn which, with its intricate syntax, describes seeking the one who seeks us:

"I sought the Lord and afterward I knew
he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me.
It was not I that found, O Saviour true,
no, I was found of thee."

I'm reminded also of *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis's account of his conversion amid his resistance to becoming a Christian: "Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about 'man's search for God,'" he wrote. "To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat."

The images of the sheep and shepherd appear less obvious as the psalm continues, yet perhaps the image of God the Shepherd can help us take hold of this final verse also. I

noted that, in this psalm, there's a shift from the sheep following the Shepherd to the psalmist pursued by "goodness and mercy." And I wonder if this psalm teaches us that the life of following God and the life of fleeing God are equally lived before God, because—whether we seek to embrace or to evade God—we are nonetheless pursued by God's grace and kindness, for God is like that shepherd in the parable who "go[es] after the one that is lost until he finds it" and "when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices" (Luke 15:4-5). Because God's lovingkindness is wondrously persistent, the psalmist—and we—can delightfully affirm: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (v. 6).

At the outset of this sermon, I asked a series of questions about what follows you—and, though I could be mistaken, I suspect that those questions may have brought to mind worries, anxieties, regrets, deficiencies. Yet, after reflecting on the final verse of Psalm 23—"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life"—I wonder if we could reframe our convictions about what's following us. Let me ask those very same questions again, this time supplying the psalmist's answer for us:

What chases you? *God's "goodness and mercy."* Day in, day out—what is it that haunts you and hounds you? *God's "goodness and mercy."* What is it that you can't get away from, no matter how hard you try? *God's "goodness and mercy."* What is it that you can't shake, that catches up to you late at night or in your moments of weakness? *God's "goodness and mercy."* What threatens to catch you and capture you even now? *God's "goodness and mercy."* Amen.