

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Sunday, April 21, 2024**

**“Goodness and Mercy Shall Follow Me”**

**Psalm 23**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

In my years as a minister and a chaplain, I’ve seen—again and again—people struggling with problems that *follow them*. Someone is worried, anxious about the future—and they just can’t get away from it; that worry, that anxiety—it, well, it *follows* them. When someone’s work environment is stressful, it’s hard to get away from that; they’re stressed *at work 9-to-5*, then they’re stressed *about work 5-to-9*; that stress can *follow* you home or even on vacation.

We can distract ourselves or look for a change of scene—but as they say, “we can’t outrun ourselves,” and so our struggles seem to *follow* us. Maybe I could just pause for a moment now, and invite you to reflect: What is it that follows you? What is it that pursues you day after day? What is it you can’t get away from?

Our Psalm in Unison this morning is Psalm 23: this is a beloved psalm, and for many of us, the most familiar...and we probably think we know it quite well. But it’s interesting: there’s a turn, a change, in this psalm—which took me years to notice—and it’s about *who* is following *whom*. The psalm starts out with the Lord leading and the psalmist following: “he *leads me* beside still waters,” the psalmist says; “He *leads me* in right paths for his name’s sake” (vv. 2-3).

Yet later on in the psalm, there’s a change; it’s no longer the psalmist following but rather the psalmist *being followed*: “Surely goodness and mercy,” the psalmist says, “*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*.” As the psalm concludes, it’s suddenly about the psalmist *being followed* by “goodness and mercy.”

But it’s more than just “following.” The word we have here, “*shall follow me*”—that’s a traditional translation (it’s the same wording you’d find in the old King James Version). In Hebrew, however, in the original language, the word is stronger—and *fiercer*—than just ‘following.’ The word we have translated as ‘follow’ (פָּרַד) can mean ‘run after,’ ‘pursue,’ ‘chase,’ ‘put to flight,’ ‘dog,’ ‘persecute,’ even ‘harass’ (B-D-B).

In the Bible, it’s a verb that usually describes “the hostile actions of enemies” (N.E.T.). So in the Book of Exodus, for example, when we read about Pharaoh’s army “*pursu[ing]*” the Israelites out of Egypt, it’s the same word. And elsewhere in the Psalms, when the psalmist speaking about enemies “*pursuing*,” it’s again that same word (7:1).

So in Psalm 23, what exactly is pursuing and harassing the psalmist? God’s “goodness and mercy”! “Goodness and mercy” are chasing down the psalmist! Here ‘Goodness’ (טוֹב) expresses “the benefit of [God’s] blessing” (Mays), the kindness of God touching down in our lives. And here ‘mercy’ (רַחֲמֵי) describes God’s lovingkindness, the loving “helpfulness of the LORD to any [...] who depend [...] on him” (Mays); it’s sometimes translated as God’s

“steadfast love” (Byassee), God’s “loyal love” (Mays), God’s “steady love” (Davis). So when we hear “goodness and mercy,” we can think of the blessing of God and the faithfulness of God, God’s kindness and God’s grace.

So the “goodness and mercy” of God—God’s blessing and faithfulness—these are chasing the psalmist...but when? I mean, when does this happen? Well, according to our psalm, God’s “goodness and mercy” are chasing down the psalmist not occasionally, not intermittently—but persistently, constantly: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me *all the days of my life*” (v. 6): “goodness and mercy” are pursuing the psalmist relentlessly, day after day after day.

This morning, our psalm invites us to celebrate that God’s “goodness and mercy” are pursuing us, pursuing you. This psalm teaches that God’s kindness and grace are coming for us. Goodness and mercy aren’t just following us: goodness and mercy are hunting us down; 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 a colleague of mine puts it, “The twin hounds of goodness and mercy are hot on our trail!” (Topping). And definitely don’t expect any respite, any moment’s pause: I’ve got to tell you, this is your unavoidable fate, and escape is just not an option, because—every moment, “all the days of [your] life”—God’s goodness and mercy will not stop pursuing you.

And wow is this ever good news for us, because I think we’re all prone to flee away from—rather than run toward—the blessing of God. I mean, how many times in your life have you made decisions that took you away from God’s “goodness and mercy”? Probably more than we’d like to admit, right? The late Rabbi Harold Kushner—who died just last year—he told 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.’

[But] [t]he 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,’” the rabbi asked the man, “‘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?’” Rabbi Kushner commented on that story: “Isn’t it possible [...] that God has all sorts of wonderful presents for us—[...] beautiful sunsets and flowers budding in the spring and leaves turning in the fall and quiet moments of sharing—but we in our pursuit of happiness are so constantly on the go that [God] cannot find us [...] to deliver them?”

You know, I think sometimes we try to flee from God, assuming that we’ll be able to find some better blessing apart from God; yet our psalm teaches that, even when we try to flee away, God’s “goodness and mercy” pursue us nonetheless—and God’s “goodness and mercy” do not let us go.

And at the same time, I think this psalm reminds us that, though we sometimes feel like we’re the ones seeking after God, this may simply be our experience of God first seeking us. As one

old hymn puts it: “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 of what C. S. Lewis said about those who speak of *our* search for God: “To me, as I then was,” he said, “they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat.”

At the outset of this sermon, as I reflected on how difficult it can be—that our problems follow us, that our worries and anxieties follow us, that we just can’t outrun what’s wrong—I asked you to pause a moment, and think: What is it that follows you? What is it that pursues you day after day? What is it you can’t get away from?

Now, I don’t know what came to your mind in that moment—what sorts of things you just can’t shake, the worries or anxieties that catch up with you late at night... And I’m also not going to ask anyone to volunteer! But you know, I’m sure we each thought about various problems that pursue us, the worries that chase us, the anxieties we really just can’t seem to outrun...

Yet now, after taking some time to reflect on Psalm 23, I wonder if we can offer a very different answer to what’s following us. I asked what’s pursuing you, and you thought of whatever you thought of—but the psalmist has a different answer: “Surely *goodness and mercy shall follow [you]* all the days of [*your*] life.”

So what’s chasing you? God’s “goodness and mercy.” Day in, day out—what’s hounding you? God’s “goodness and mercy.” What is that you can’t get away from, no matter how hard you try? God’s “goodness and mercy.” What is that you just can’t shake, that you can’t outmaneuver, and that you have no hope of outrunning? God’s “goodness and mercy.” What’s going to catch up to you and overtake you, no matter what? God’s “goodness and mercy.” “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow [*you*] all the days of [*your*] life.” Thank God! Amen.