

Mercy Shall Follow

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

It seems like a dream to come to church on a Spring Sunday and encounter an old friend. In the midst of a pandemic where we appear to be isolated and alone.

Back when things were “normal”, even then Sunday could be a jarring, discordant experience. You would settle down into the pew only to be hit over the head by some unfamiliar idea, some alien biblical text, or a pushy preacher peddling an even pushier biblical passage.

But not this Sunday. In the midst of the madness of Covid-19 the Fourth Sunday in Lent offers us a meeting with an old familiar friend and carries us way back into the quaint, bygone world of sheep and shepherds.

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want” (23:1 NRSV). I cannot remember when I did not know this Psalm. Can you? Even if a person knows no scripture by heart and can’t find a verse when they need it, they know this. I can see the faded pastel picture from my third grade Sunday School class: Jesus, the Good Shepherd. It is the go-to Psalm to teach children, since it expresses a childlike trust in God’s ability to protect us, just like a shepherd.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters” (v. 2). Restful, reassuring. Sheep don’t drink from dangerous, swift flowing rivers, don’t have to observe social isolation. This Shepherd finds just the right spot for the sheep to rest, to be restored. “He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake” (v. 3 NRSV).

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley...” (v. 4 NRSV) The pleasant mornings of childhood fade as we look down a gradually darkening corridor toward the end of life, and there to meet us is not a dark abyss of death, but the Shepherd. “I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me” (v. 4 NRSV).

One of the most comforting aspects of friendship is that the best friendships last throughout life. “We have been friends since elementary school,” someone says. As a minister, I have been impressed that when life draws to a close for someone and it is their turn to walk through the valley, they inevitably reach out for this old friend, Psalm 23. It isn’t simply because they know it by heart. It is because it dares to speak about the end, the darkest valley, and names it as a place where the Good Shepherd comforts us. So, here is scripture for the beginning of life and for the end. It’s a rare funeral where Psalm 23 has not been invited to speak a word or two over the grave.

“I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long” (v. 6 NRSV). Whenever, in this life, we have been forced into some dry desert or had to sail tossed and turned in a raging torrent, it was this old friend who calmed our souls by reminding us of the green pastures and still waters and thereby restored our souls. When we wander without direction or meaning, there was the good old Twenty-Third to point out the right paths for his name’s sake.

When life made us wonder if God was there for us—if God cared, it was motherly Twenty-Three who put comforting arms around us and reassured us of a God who makes, leads, restores, comforts, prepares, anoints; so that in darkness or light, life or death, we might dwell with God.

Good old, familiar-since-childhood, reassuring Psalm Twenty-Three speaks of still waters and green pastures. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (v. 6 NRSV) But wait. A closer look at our old friend reveals something I had not seen before. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all my days.” But a look at the Hebrew reveals that, as is so often in the Bible, a word can be translated more than one way.

Goodness? The word has many nuances in the Old Testament. Goodness names all those benefits of God’s presence. Even in the valley, it is good to know that God stands with us. Mercy?

This is that beloved Hebrew word *hesed*. The prophets loved that word. *Hesed*—often translated “steadfast love.” Mercy is the word for the kindness, the fidelity of God, even when we are not faithful. God’s goodness and kindness follow us.

But the word that most surprises is translated as “follow.” Goodness and kindness follow me. The Hebrew can also be translated as “pursue” me. Goodness and mercy pursue me. Pharaoh’s chariots pursued the Children of Israel to the sea (Exodus 14:8). “I pursued my enemies and overtook them,” sang David after he had triumphed (Psalm 18:37 NRSV). “Our pursuers were swifter than the vultures...they chased us on the mountains, they lay in wait for us in the wilderness” (Lamentations 4:19 NRSV).

Surely goodness and mercy pursue me, all the days of my life. And for me, even in the presence of an old friend about whom I thought I knew everything, there is a ripple upon still waters. Pursue me. Here we are, plodding through life, and, oh yes, who’s that behind me? Oh, that’s goodness and mercy. They’re following me. Tagging along. Hmm. Looks to me as if they may be pursuing you too. Follow or pursue? You make the call. It’s much the same thought as in that wonderful poem:

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears I hid from Him,...
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.”
—Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*

I don’t care how well you think you know the Good Shepherd of Psalm Twenty-Three, you don’t know him until you’ve realized that he is a pursuer. There’s a difference between being “followed” and “pursued.” There’s a difference between looking back over your shoulder and finding dear old, predictable, goodness with mercy in tow, trudging up the hill behind you, and being jumped

by a breathless goodness and mercy.

I met them in the faces of my children: one in a maternity ward in Wolseley, the other at St. Anthony's Hospital in Esterhazy.

Being a parent isn't always a picnic. So many responsibilities! Had to get money for education. Still have to be a good example. Plans to be made, conflicts to be managed, hurdles to get over. Even adult children are no picnic!

Yet, the other day when the two walked toward me, and my friend asked me, "What are the names of your children?" without a moment's hesitation, I was able to answer, "Well, the tall one, that's Goodness, and the girl with the blonde hair, we call Mercy."

"The Lord is my shepherd," we say. The shepherd leads us down to the quiet, level pasture; the shepherd knows where to find the quiet, restful brook whereby we can rest and be refreshed. But then Jesus told us about the Shepherd who—when just one stupid sheep strayed from the fold—left the ninety-and-nine out in the wilderness (Luke 15:3-7) and pursued the one lost sheep until he found it. The Shepherd pursued until he found the lost.

"You've done all you can do for that boy," friends told them.

"There are limits to what parents can do. He's an adult now. It's time for him to stand or fall on his own. Let him go."

No. The Shepherd pursued until he found the one who was lost. Most sheep are content with an occasional green pasture, a quiet brook here and there. "But there are other sheep," said the Good Shepherd, "who are not of this fold. I go to seek them as well." (John 10:16). And when this pursuing pastor finds the lost, he puts that sheep on his shoulders and breathlessly returns to the fold, "I found my sheep who was lost! Rejoice with me."

"I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15). Is there no limit to his pursuit?

They knew him as a mean old man. Resentful. Bitter. Someone said that his bitterness was justified. His beloved wife died giving birth to their one child. The child died shortly thereafter from complications. “He has reason to be bitter,” they said in town.

Never went to church. Never had anything to do with anyone. When, in his late sixties, they carried him out of his apartment and over to the hospital to die, no one visited, no flowers were sent. He went there to die alone.

There was this nurse. Well, she wasn’t actually a nurse yet, just a student nurse. She was in training, and because she was in training she didn’t know everything that they teach you in school about the necessity for detachment, the need for distance with your patients. She befriended the old man. It had been so long since he had friends, he didn’t know how to act with one. He told her, “Go away! Leave me alone!”

She would smile. Try to coax him to eat his Jell-O. At night, she would tuck him in. “Don’t need nobody to help me,” he would growl.

Soon, he grew so weak he had not the strength to resist her kindness. Late at night, after her duties were done, she would pull up a chair and sit by his bed and sing to him as she held his old, gnarled hand. And he looked up at her in the dim lamp light and wondered if he saw the face of a little one whom he never got to see as an adult. And a tear formed in his eye when she kissed him goodnight. And for the first time in forty, maybe fifty years, he said, “God bless you.”

And as she left the room, two others remained, breathless, whispering softly in the old man’s ear the last word he heard before slipping away into the dark valley. The word was “Gotcha!” whispered in unison by Goodness and Mercy.

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also...So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16 NRSV).

This Shepherd is always out seeking, pursuing. We wander down crooked paths, bob like jetsam down some raging river, but he has met us there, pursued us, even into the valley of Covid 19, with a "Gotcha!" Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayer:

In this time of COVID-19, we pray:
When we aren't sure, God,
help us be calm;
when information comes
from all sides, correct and not,
help us to discern;
when fear makes it hard to breathe,
and anxiety seems to be the order of the day,
slow us down, God;
help us to reach out with our hearts,
when we can't touch with our hands;
help us to be socially connected,
when we have to be socially distant;
help us to love as perfectly as we can,
knowing that "perfect love casts out all fear."
For the doctors, we pray,
for the nurses, we pray,
for the technicians and the janitors and the
aides and the caregivers, we pray,
for the researchers and theorists,
the epidemiologists and investigators,
for those who are sick,
and those who are grieving, we pray,
for all who are affected,
all around the world...
we pray
for safety,
for health,
for wholeness.
May we feed the hungry,
give drink to the thirsty,
clothe the naked and house those without homes;
may we walk with those who feel they are alone,
and may we do all that we can to heal
the sick—
in spite of the epidemic,
in spite of the fear.
Help us, O God,
that we might help each other.
In the love of the Creator,
in the name of the Healer,
in the life of the Holy Spirit that is in all and with all,
we pray. May it be so. — A prayer during times of COVID-19 by the Right Rev. Richard Bott, originally posted on Facebook.