

July 18, 2021
“Pursued By Love”
Psalm 23
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There's a joke, a pretty bad joke to be honest, about Psalm 23. Maybe you've heard it, but I'm guessing you probably haven't. So let me apologize in advance, but here goes:

A mother was concerned about her son, Xavier. He was about to start kindergarten, but didn't want her to walk with him to school. They didn't live too far away so she was willing to give him a sense of independence, while also wanting to make sure he was safe. Xavier was set to walk with a friend and classmate, but she also told her neighbor about it. And her neighbor – who was usually out for a walk with her toddler at that time – offered to follow him, staying at a distance so he wouldn't notice.

So the neighbor followed Xavier and his friend every morning for the first week of school. “Have you noticed that lady following us to school all week?” Xavier's friend asked. “Do you know her?”

“Yeah, I know her. That's our neighbor, Mrs. Goodnest and her daughter, Marcy.” You see where this is going, right?

“Why's she following us?” the friend asked. “Well,” said Xavier, “Every night before bed my mom makes me say the 23rd Psalm. At the end it says, ‘Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life,’ so I guess I'll just have to get used to it.”

I'm sorry. I did warn you. It's a bad joke but I like the way it ends, Xavier's reaction: “. . . I guess I'll just have to get used to it.” Hold that thought.

There's a reason Psalm 23, among so many memorable and meaningful Psalms, is the most well-known. Memorized by children in synagogues and churches and homes around the world, recited at weddings and funerals, set to music of all kinds (and example of which we heard already this morning), it epitomizes the fullness of God's peace and presence, the profound satisfaction and comfort of divine rest and restoration. It paints a captivating picture of life – or at least a moment in life – free of

worry or want, without fear of anything. The metaphor of God as Shepherd. Pastures green. Waters still. Heads anointed. Cups overflowing.

For many people, including me, verse 6 stands out as a particular favorite: "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."

The words are familiar, and so it can be helpful to hear different translations:

- **New International Version:** "Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life . . ."
- **Good News Translation:** "I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life . . ."
- **Complete Jewish Bible:** "Goodness and grace will pursue me every day of my life . . ."
- **American Standard Version:** "Surely goodness and lovingkindness shall follow me all the days of my life . . ."
- **Common English Bible:** "Yes, goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life . . ."
- **And finally from The Message**, the translation we heard earlier as we breathed our way into worship together: "Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life."

That translation actually gets us closest to the meaning of the original Hebrew. The operative word, the verb *radaph*, doesn't merely mean to be with or to follow, but to chase after, to run after, to put to flight. It is far more persistent and aggressive, and in fact, is often used to describe trying to run down an enemy. It's used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the actions of Israel's enemies, as in: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will *raw-daf* them" or "Let the enemy *raw-daf* and overtake me . . ."

So imagine that kind of hateful, vengeful intensity turned on its head. God pursuing us, chasing after us, *relentlessly* chasing after us, with goodness and mercy and love. God, in fact, preparing a table before us in the presence of our enemies. The Hebrew word,

hesed, translated in our reading this morning as “mercy,” is also used, for example, in Micah 6:8: “And God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love *hesed*, and to walk humbly with your God?” Another translation suggests instead, “covenant love” – referring to the love that is promised by God and practiced in faithful relationship with God and each other.

And so Psalm 23 reminds us that no matter how far from God and each other – and even ourselves – we may feel, God is always pursuing us with love. God is never NOT pursuing us with love. As one commentary put it, “We don’t have to go out looking for the presence of God; instead, it is always on its way to us. Perhaps it is when we are out of breath, not able to take another step, that we finally notice goodness and mercy have caught up with us.”

Feminist Catholic theologian Catherine LaCugna writes that “One finds God because one is already found by God.” One finds God because one is already found by God.

We are already found by God. As we were created by God, so we are pursued by God. As we were created by Love, so we are pursued by Love. You couldn’t run away from that kind of love even if you wanted to, because God has more stamina than we do – a truth also expressed in Psalm 139: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

And further expressed in Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

In preparing for worship this week, I was reminded that the last time I preached on Psalm 23 was about eight years ago, shortly after I left my job as Protestant campus

minister and interfaith chaplain at Drexel University. It was at Calvary, filling in for Pastor John while he was on vacation.

As some of you know, the way things ended for me at Drexel—after seven years (four on my own, and then the last three in a role shared with Amy)—was one of the most painful, demoralizing experiences of my life. Comforting as Psalm 23 can be, I was not feeling that comfort at the time—nor for a long time after. More like Psalm 22, and the gut-wrenching verses Jesus quotes while hanging on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.”

Now theologically speaking, I didn't and don't believe that God abandoned me in that experience, but I absolutely felt forsaken. Rejected. Defeated. Alone. Weary. Love felt far away. I preached on the gift of reading Psalm 22 and Psalm 23 together, bookending, as they do, the full emotional range of human experience. The vulnerable brokenness and disparity and isolation of Psalm 22, and the unparalleled joy and peace of being fully at home in Psalm 23.

And so taken together, the two Psalms provide further reminder that we are already found by God, pursued by God, by Love, capital-L Love, even when it doesn't feel that way. Goodness and mercy will eventually catch up to us.

I want to say a word here about identity. Our identity, before all else, as God's beloved. As those who are pursued by God. Pursued by Love.

William Sloane Coffins writes, “Of God's love we can say two things: it is poured out universally for everyone from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the planet; and secondly, God's love doesn't seek value, it creates value. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value. Our value is a gift, not an achievement.”

And he goes on to say, “Because our value is a gift, we don’t have to prove ourselves, only to express ourselves, and what a world of difference there is between proving ourselves and expressing ourselves.”

Psalm 23 also reminds us that our identity, WHO WE ARE, is grounded in loving relationship with God, in God’s abiding presence with us, in God’s relentless pursuit of us.

The story of the burning bush, from Exodus, makes the same point. You may know the story, when God – the Shepherd – appears to Moses – a shepherd himself, busy tending his father’s flock – in the form of a burning bush. Of particular note for us this morning is the exchange between Moses and God immediately after God recounts the suffering of the Israelites, and lets Moses know that he’s the one who will lead the people – God’s people – out of captivity.

Moses says, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” “Who am I?” To which God responds, “I will be with you . . .”

Moses’ question is about identity, self-identity, and in light of Moses’ hesitation (likely, and understandably rooted in fear and self-doubt), God’s answer is about relationship. God affirms for Moses that his identity, WHO HE IS, is fundamentally grounded in relationship with God. Before you were, before you are, I am with you. I am with you. You are pursued by goodness and mercy and love, and so you don’t have to prove yourself or defend yourself or doubt yourself. I am with you, you are pursued by goodness and mercy and capital-L love, and so you are free to express your God-given self in service to the world. That is a beautiful thing.

Remember, friends, that God is with you on the road. Always. No matter what. Nothing can change that. In fact, it’s baked into your identity as a beloved child of God. You are fundamentally in relationship with God—you may stray, like the lost sheep in Jesus’ parable, but God will leave the 99 to find you, and celebrate your return! You may quit God, but God will not quit you. May you find rest, and restoration, in that blessed assurance.

Surely, surely, the God of Love, the God who is Love itself, is pursuing you with love. With covenant love. With goodness and mercy. The God of Psalm 23 is pursuing you with love, even when you feel like Psalm 22. You're just gonna have to get used to it.

May it be so.