

4 LENT APRIL 3, 2011 CYCLE "A"

THEME: COMFORT ME, O GOD.

READINGS: 1Sam.16:1-13, Ps. 23, Eph. 5:8-14, John 9:1-17,35-41

Contemporary Service: Eph. 5:8-14, Ps. 23, John 9:1-17,35-41

I can't remember a time when I did not know the 23rd Psalm. Can you? Do you remember your first encounter with the Shepherd Psalm? Even if you don't know any other scripture by heart, even if you can't recite the books of the Bible, in their proper order, even if you can't find a verse when you need it, you still know the 23rd Psalm. And one of the very first pictures I remember ever seeing was the picture of Jesus, the good Shepherd, with the little lamb draped across his shoulders and the words printed across the bottom, "The Lord is my shepherd." Is there a Sunday school or church where that picture is not present? I seriously doubt it! It always expresses a child-like trust in God's ability to protect us, just like a shepherd protects his flock.

During my 15 years as a Hospice Chaplain more often than not, I found that when life is drawing to a close for a child of God, when that person has entered into the valley of the shadow of death and knows that the end of life is near, inevitably he or she will reach out for the hand of this old friend, the 23rd Psalm. And it is not just because the person knows it by heart, and has known it his/her whole life, it is because the psalm dares to speak about death, about the end, about that dark valley. It names that place as a place where we are most keenly aware of the presence of the Good Shepherd and receive the comfort only God can give. Here, then, is that rarest of scriptures that is both for the beginning of life, to be memorized in nursery school, and for the end of life, as a comforting old friend, when life makes us wonder if God is really there for us, if God really cares for us. It's the 23rd Psalm which comforts us as only as an old friend can, reassuring us of the presence of a God who makes, and leads, and restores, and comforts, and prepares and anoints, so that in darkness or light, life or death we might live in the presence of God.

"Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life..." That's the translation you grew up with, right? What if I told you that there was one word in this sentence that could possibly be translated more than one way, and that the alternative translation might alter your perspective? Is it "goodness"? Certainly goodness has many different uses in the Old Testament. But even in the valley of the shadow, it's comforting to know that it is still God's "goodness" that is with us. Is it "mercy"? This is the beloved Hebrew word "hesed". No, it's not "hesed," because

“hesed” manifests God’s steadfast love,” God’s kindness and faithfulness, even when we ourselves are not faithful.

The word that provides the little twist, the “Aha!” the moment preachers search for, is the word that is translated as “**follow**”. Goodness and mercy **follow** us. That is the way we have always heard it, right? But the Hebrew word used here can also be translated “**pursue**”. Is there a difference between being followed and being pursued? I think so! **Pursue** is a considerably more active word than follow. So if we are pursued by mercy and goodness rather than followed, there is a big difference. Just picture yourself plodding your way through life, then look back over your shoulder and who is that behind you? Why, that’s just goodness and mercy, following along, just tagging along. But wait, they are not just following you they are **pursuing** you! Relentlessly pursuing, tirelessly pursuing, never giving up, struggling and straining to get to you! That’s God in his goodness and mercy!

No matter how well you know the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23, you don’t really know him until you’ve spent some time thinking of him as a relentless pursuer. There is a difference, a big difference between being followed and being pursued. There’s a difference between looking back over your shoulder and seeing good old predictable goodness and mercy tagging along, trudging up the hill behind you, and being pursued by a breathless goodness and mercy. “We’re going to get you, sooner or later! You know we’re going to catch up to you, for we are God’s relentless, tireless goodness and mercy! We will never quit until we have surrounded you with that endless, beautiful, life-giving goodness and mercy of Almighty God!

Once there was a grumpy old man. Everyone said he was mean. He chased kids and dogs away from his house. He was resentful and bitter. His wife had died giving birth to their only child, a little girl who lived only a short time. He then lived alone, never went to church, never ate out, and never had anything to do with anybody. Near the end of his life when the rescue squad carried him out of his house and over to the hospital to die no one came to visit him. No one called, no one sent flowers, or was interested in him. He was prepared to die alone.

But there was a nurse, actually she was a nurse’s aide, who hadn’t yet learned in nursing school that she should keep her emotional distance from patients, and so she tried to be a friend to the grumpy old man. Of course, since it had been so long since he had had a friend, the old man didn’t know how to act. She would reach out to him in friendship, and he would respond, “Go away! Leave me alone!”

Soon the old man grew too weak to resist the young woman's kindness. Late at night, when she had finished her duties for the day, she would come back to the old man's room and pull up a chair and sit by his bed. Sometimes she would sing to him softly as she held his old, time-withered hand and softly pray for him, often praying the 23rd Psalm. And the old man would look up at her in the dim light of the bedside lamp and wonder if he was looking into the face of a little girl he had loved as an infant but lost and never got to see as an adult. A tear would come to his eye when she kissed his forehead and whispered, "Good-night." One night, for the first time in more years than he could remember the old man whispered back, "God bless you."

It was evident that when the young student nurse left the room, two others remained behind, breathless from all the years of pursuit. Just before the old man slipped away into the dark valley, goodness and mercy whispered in unison the last words he would hear. "Don't be afraid. We're here; we've caught up to you, and will take you to the Lord."

May goodness and mercy **pursue** you all the days of your life. But now, especially now, stop and let them catch up with you and wash over you and heal you as only God in his mercy and goodness can. **Amen.**

Pastor Barney