

March 19, 2023 Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church  
The Twenty-third Psalm  
"Catch Me If You Can"  
Douglas T. King

Pretty words, but to what point? Yes, the words of the twenty-third Psalm are lovely and iconic, but to what point? There is an inherent risk to these well-known texts. They can become like lullabies whose oft repeated lyrics go unheard. For instance, Rock a By Baby, do we ever really listen to the words? "When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, cradle and all?" Really??? Sometimes it is good to take a moment with these favorites and listen to them carefully once again.

I was reviewing the text of the twenty-third Psalm in the original Hebrew to see if there was anything I was missing in our English translation. I mangled my way through with my very rusty Hebrew rusty. As I neared the end of the passage I found something that has transformed the way

I hear the entire psalm. The first part of verse six, reads in English "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..." I have always found the line pleasing but rather vague. However, in the Hebrew it is an entirely different kettle of fish. The psalmist is not telling us that "goodness and mercy shall follow us in some vanilla sort of way. The verb's literal translation is more akin to the English verbs "pursue" or "chase."

This entire line packs an altogether different punch to me now. Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life. We are not talking about some gentle goodness of the Lord floating around in our general vicinity. The intent and the passion are a thousand-fold from that.

Now it is not as if we have not heard before that God is looking for us. Many times we have heard the parable in the gospel of Luke of the woman who lights a lamp and sweeps her house in search of a lost coin. I have always pictured an elderly woman carefully poking around under chintz in search of that lost bit of silver. It has been comforting to imagine that in the same way God is searching us out. But it always seemed to me that we might be able to stay a step ahead of the search. That elderly woman is probably not racing around her living room, flinging tchotchkes aside to find us. I figured if we wanted to keep out of God's grasp we could get the job done.

This verb in the twenty-third Psalm is a more aggressive bit of business. God is chasing us down, even hunting us down. It makes me think of that dream that is nearly universal. There are several universal dreams. There is the one in which we dream we are completely unprepared for something. Either we forgot to do our homework, or study for a test or for preachers we climb into the pulpit without an inkling of a sermon in our heads. Let's hope that is not today. There is a second universal dream in which we envision ourselves naked before a public group of people. We find ourselves totally exposed for all of who we are with nary a robe or a set of

drapes to hide behind. Let's really hope that is not true today. And then there is a third common dream where we have the sensation we are being chased. We are doing our best to escape but the going is inevitably slow. It is as if our feet are plodding through quicksand and our pursuer is running on a track. Most of us awake before we are caught but I believe we are all familiar with that fearful adrenaline rush of not being able to escape.

Someone with a more in-depth understanding of Jungian psychology than I could unpack more deeply the implications of these dreams we often share. But what is clear is that these themes are tapping something prevalent in our unconscious minds. There is something in the human condition that makes it common for us to fear being unprepared; being exposed; being overtaken by something beyond our control; of being threatened to be caught by something harmful.

In our lives we can feel pursued by many things, by the challenges we face at work; by the unrealistic expectations we place upon ourselves of how our lives should be; by time itself and the age and mortality with which it brings us face to face. There are many ways we can feel as if we are being gained upon by forces beyond our control. When we were children and had these dreams we could call out in the night and have a parent scoop us up. We were reminded we were being protected by someone who loves us; who at the time seemed more powerful than those fears in our night-time heads. As we grow up we lose that security blanket but not all of those fears.

I do not think there is a way to ever expunge all of the chase dreams from our minds or the reality of feeling pursued when we survey the rearview mirrors of our lives. But what if we knew that whatever we feel pursued by in our lives was not the only thing pursuing us and certainly not the most powerful thing pursuing us? What if we knew that for whatever we feel looming over us, there is someone greater and more powerful and ever-loving pursuing us?

Do you remember the old joke about two people in the woods talking about what they would do if they encountered a bear? The one person wonders about whether they are fast enough to outrun a bear. The other person makes the perceptive comment, "I am not worried about outrunning the bear, I only have to outrun you."

There is some variation of that theme at work in the twenty-third Psalm. In the end we do not need to outrun whatever chases us in our dreams. God's pursuit of us will pass by whatever we fear and safely scoop us up. Even in the midst of death's dark valley "surely goodness and mercy will chase us down and claim us."

The other piece of this puzzle for me has always been about the times in our lives when we are trying to hide not only from our fears but from God as well. Depression or exhaustion or heartbreak lays claim to us. We bury ourselves in work or alcohol or whatever we use to numb ourselves. We find ourselves in such a deep hole that we do not want to be touched by anyone, even by God. We find ourselves in such a deep and dark valley we do not want to be reached by anything. In the deepest hole God will pursue us and find us there. In the darkest valley,

God will pursue us and find us there. When we are so lost we do not even know where we are, God will pursue us and find us there.

God is not some benign and static entity tucked up in the clouds watching from a distance. God is actively chasing us down in each and every moment of our lives. In the midst of enemies and darkness and death itself God's goodness and mercy is hot on our trail offering us an abundance beyond our imaginations, our cups will surely overflow.

Those little ones we baptized this morning, William and Ellie, they have been claimed by God. They will be pursued their entire lives, from kindergarten to high school to college, from young adulthood to middle age to their senior years. God's goodness and mercy will seek them out day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade. No matter where they go or what they do God's goodness and mercy will be coming relentlessly for them. It is an inheritance that will never be exhausted or denied.

The scholar Walter Brueggemann has honed the twenty-third Psalm down to a single sentence, "It is God's companionship that transforms every situation." I would add, and they will never outrun that companionship.

In the midst of our deepest fears of being unprepared and unworthy, exposed and vulnerable; in the dark and scary places in our hearts where fear sometimes reigns; let us place our deepest trust in this. We are being chased down, pursued, sought after by our God, this very minute and every minute. There is no speed we can run, no place we

can hide, to escape the goodness and mercy that is on the way for us.

Thanks, be to God. Amen.