

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 18, 2025
John 10:22-30; Psalm 23

"Divine Pursuit"

A Sunday school teacher named Mrs. Murphy was teaching her class the twenty-third Psalm. As the little voices chorused out, she detected a false note. One by one, she heard the children recite the Psalm, until at last, she came across one little boy who concluded the Psalm with the words, "Surely good Miss Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life."

It's easy to understand why that little boy would mistake goodness and mercy for good Miss Murphy, because he was casting the Psalm into terms with which he was familiar. That is the objective for all of us as we read scripture - to try to make sense of it in our terms.

The twenty-third Psalm is perhaps the most familiar piece of scripture around. When we come to church and hear it read, it is like bumping into an old friend. Sometimes scripture can be a jarring experience. We settle down into the pew only to be poked in the ribs by some uncomfortable imperative of scripture – like feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, visiting the prisoner, clothing the naked and caring for the widows and orphans.

But not this Sunday. The Fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Shepherd Sunday. The recommended text for all three years of the lectionary cycle is Psalm 23, the Shepherd Psalm. It is our old friend, as comfortable and familiar as many of our hymns. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

I can't remember a time when I didn't know this Psalm. Even if we aren't familiar with scripture and don't know Malachi from Matthew, we know this Psalm, or at least parts of it. It brings to mind the faded pastel Sunday School picture of Jesus, with staff in hand, surrounded by sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

This Psalm begins with an almost childlike innocence, expressing trust in God's ability to protect us. We should be clear, before we go any further, that as idyllic as it sounds for Jesus to be our shepherd, that also means that we are His sheep.

Anyone who has ever spent any time around sheep will tell you that while lambs may be cute and cuddly, sheep are big, smelly, woolly, dumb animals (sounds like some of my

friends in Junior High). This is not a particularly complimentary image, because we like to think of ourselves as independent free-thinkers, who are at the top of the food chain.

But sheep-like is what we are. We are weighed down by our own wooly problems. We are easily lost by wandering off the beaten path. We can become entangled in the bramble patch of temptation. We are easily misled by following another sheep instead of the shepherd. Yes, "the Lord is our shepherd," and we are His sheep.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." What a restful, reassuring image. Did you know that sheep won't drink from running water? The Good Shepherd finds just the right spot for the sheep to rest, where the still water runs deep for the restoration of our souls.

"He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." The Good Shepherd leads us along the right paths not because we deserve it, but because God's love demands nothing less than the best for us.

The Psalm says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." As the pleasant mornings of childhood yield to a fading twilight, we look down a corridor toward the end of life, and there to meet us is not a dark abyss of death, but the Good Shepherd.

In nearly 50 years of professional ministry, I have performed hundreds of funerals and memorial services. I can count on one hand the number of times that the twenty-third Psalm has not been requested. Time after time, I have seen people who walk through the dark valley reach out and take the hand of this old friend, the twenty-third Psalm. They grasp its hand not just because they know it by heart, but because it dares to speak about the end and names it as a place where our Good Shepherd comforts us.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over." In the Middle East, whenever a person discovers another person wandering in the desert, he or she is obligated to give that person shelter and food, even if the person turns out to be their worst enemy. But nowhere is it expected to anoint that person's head with oil, an honor reserved for prophets and kings. God goes the extra mile with us, providing not only our basic necessities, but also treating us like royalty. Truly, our blessings from God spill over the lip of our shallow cups.

Whenever in this life, we have been forced into some dry desert, or had to navigate turbulent waters, it was this old friend, who reminded us of the green pastures and still waters and thereby restored our soul. When we have wandered without direction or purpose, there was good old Psalm twenty-three to point out the right paths for God's name sake, just because that's the way God works with us.

When life has made us wonder if God cared, if God was there for us, it was number twenty-three who put comforting arms around us and reassured us of a God who is actively involved with us, making, leading, restoring, comforting, preparing, and anointing so that, in darkness or light, life or death, we might dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall "follow" me?....." Wait a minute. What's this? Something we've never seen before. There's an aspect of our dear old friend we've never noticed. In Hebrew, the word, "follow," more often than not is translated, "pursue." "Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me, all the days of my life." Does that make a difference? I believe it does.

Here we are ambling through life, wandering off the "straight and narrow" and we sense something behind us. What is it? That's goodness and mercy. Are they simply following us? No, they're not just tagging along at a safe distance, unwilling to be sullied by the messiness of our lives. They're actively pursuing us.

I don't care how well we think we know the Good Shepherd of the twenty-third Psalm, we don't know him until we've realized that God is a pursuer. There's a difference between being "followed" and being "pursued". There's a difference between looking back over our shoulder and finding dear old, predictable goodness with mercy in tow, trudging up the hill behind us, versus being jumped by a breathless goodness and mercy.

Jesus told us about this aspect of God in the parable of the lost sheep. In a herd of one hundred, the Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine just to pursue the one lost sheep until he finds it. "Goodness and mercy shall pursue me." People say, "You've done all you can for that boy. There are limits to what parents can do." But there are no limits for what God will do. God doesn't give up.

God pursues us to the very end of our days with goodness and mercy. When the pursuing pastor (that's Latin for "shepherd") finds the lost sheep, he puts it on his shoulders (stinky, hot, and full of burrs and brambles, as it is) and breathlessly returns to the fold shouting, "I have found my sheep that was lost! Rejoice with me." "I lay down my life for the sheep," says Jesus. Is there no limit to God's pursuit?

Is there a limit to our pursuit? Yesterday, I officiated a memorial service for a 20 year old woman who committed suicide. Afterward, two young women who were friends of Emma approached me and thanked me for my kindness in the service. One of the women then said, "This is the first time I've been in a church that was kind to me. Can I have a hug?" Their perspective reminded me that there is a world of hurt out there and that sometimes the church has been a part of that pain through our unwelcoming attitude. As followers of Jesus, our good shepherd, we are responsible for pursuing even those who have felt unwelcome in the church.

The Good Shepherd is always out seeking and pursuing. We have drifted down crooked paths or floated along with the current of some raging river, and he has met us there, pursued us, even into the valley. "Gotcha!" No matter how far astray we may go, God will never give up on us. God pursues us with a steadfast determination that is born of steadfast love.

William Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, tells the following story. "We knew him as a mean old man. Resentful. Bitter. Someone said that his bitterness was justified. 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 exactly 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 and try to coax him to eat his Jello. 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. 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 on his forehead.

For the first time in forty, maybe fifty years, he said, "God bless you." 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: 'Gotcha!' The word was whispered in unison by Goodness and Mercy."

There is no length to which our Good Shepherd will not go in order to restore our soul, so that we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Thanks be to God our pursuing shepherd.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has

something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen