



*Chased by Goodness and Mercy*  
Easter 4A 5/3/20  
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment  
Christ Church, Needham, MA

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

We can't affirm and proclaim that enough these days. I'm going to preach on our Hebrew Bible text this morning. It's not usually what is done in our tradition: more often than not, I'm likely to preach on the Gospel. We tend to give pride of place to the Gospel reading. On the one hand, that's well and good. The Gospel reading always highlights the words and actions of Jesus, the one whom we strive to follow; *and*, the way our services are constructed, the sermon comes right after the Gospel reading. It's right there, hanging in the air, waiting for commentary. But I'm going to preach on our Hebrew Bible text this morning, not only because it speaks to our condition, and not just because it's not just the Gospel Reading that's Good News~ (that's one way to translate the word Gospel from the Greek) but because, properly understood, *all* of our Scripture—Hebrew Bible *and* New Testament—carries the Good News of God's love.

Indeed, all of what happens in our liturgy speaks of the Good News of God's love; and in fact, everything that happens in this building, or nowadays, in the cyberspace brick and mortar of Zoom and Facebook, should shout out, and equip us to live out, the Good News of God's faithfulness, and love for us and our neighbors. Even more important, I'm going to preach on the Hebrew Bible text because it is the Bible that Jesus knew.

As a good Jewish boy, he would have been raised at his mother's knee on the stories about Adam and Eve, Moses and Miriam, Hannah and Samuel, Ruth and Naomi, David and Solomon, Isaiah and Malachi; he would have known the stories of the Creation, the Exodus, the growth and destruction of the monarchy, the Babylonian Captivity and the Restoration of the Temple, the thundering compassion of the Prophets, and so on, the whole sweep of God's saving activity in Israel's life in Scripture. He was drenched in the riches of it.

In the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke especially, words from the Hebrew Bible are regularly on Jesus's lips. And in Matthew and Mark, at the very end of his life, in agony on the cross, Jesus cries out with his dying breath the words of Psalm 22: My God, why have you forsaken me? *Therefore*: If we would seek to know the mind and heart of Jesus, we, too, should immerse ourselves in the power of the Hebrew Scriptures, the foundational part of our Bible.

There are few passages from Scripture as beloved as Psalm 23. I can tell you that as a priest who has presided at scores of funerals and memorial services, I can count on very few fingers the ones that have *not* included Psalm 23. *And* it must be in the King James translation, an English translation of the Bible written during the reign of King James of Great Britain, in the early 1600s.

In times of deep grief and mourning, in times of creeping fear and insidious anxiety, in a time of pandemic, Psalm 23 applies the balm of powerful images reminding us of the love and presence of



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God, wherever we are in our lives, come what may. The first third of the psalm sets up the image of the shepherd: the Psalmist refers to God in the third person as the shepherd.

The Psalmist is a sheep. Sheep and shepherds were common images and practical realities in the ancient near east. The king was often thought of as a shepherd. The subjects were sheep. The sheep lies down in the grass. The sheep drinks from a calm and glassy pool. The sheep is safe. The sheep is led (I've learned that sheep are led; cows are pushed); the sheep follows. Life is calm. Life is good. God is in his heaven and all is right with the world.

The mood of the psalm changes in the middle. Danger appears. The Psalmist encounters a deep threat, a danger as profound as death, danger like a "ravine." God is no longer referred to in the third person. Rather, the Psalmist addresses God directly: "Thou art with me." And in the direct address to God, the Psalmist expresses an implicit trust in the promise of God: "I will fear no evil *because* you are with me. Your rod and staff" – the tools of the shepherd— "they comfort me."

In the Gospel story this morning, Jesus compares himself to the gate of the sheep pen. It was not unusual for the shepherd him or herself to sleep in the gap that allowed the sheep to go in and out. His or her very body was protection for the sheep.

What or who is God's rod and staff for you? In our current circumstances, what or who is giving you the sense that God is with you? And, as important, where are *you* able to be God's rod and staff for someone else? *And*, as the Psalmist continues, *not only* is God protecting you, God is setting a table for you, even in the face of your foes. *And*, not only is God feeding you, God's provision is *overflowing*.

In the face of cynicism and passivity the other day, I came upon an uplifting YouTube feature that many of you may know about. It's called "Some Good News." It is a 15-minute potpourri of entertaining and moving video clips, twitter tidbits, interviews of celebrities and everyday folks, all stitched together by Newton's own John Krasinski. Yesterday, the program included a segment called the Some Good News "Potluck," a 6-minute portion in which four regular people— (including Krasinki's grandmother, I think, who offers a recipe for a cocktail called a "Quarantini)— share a treasured family recipe with a celebrity chef, who then prepares it before our eyes. I found the abundant generosity, hospitality, and respect flowing among the participants truly moving. One of the celebrity chefs, Guy Fieiri, is in the process of raising 100 million dollars for unemployed restaurant workers.

*And*, the Psalmist goes on to say, not only is God giving more than you need, God is expecting you, empowering you, to serve as well. The Psalmist says, "You have anointed my head with oil." In the world of the Bible, Kings and Queens were anointed with oil—and anointing meant service to God's people.



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So, in the Psalm we go from God's presence in tranquility, to God's presence and provision in danger and death, to God's expectation and empowerment to serve. ***And it gets even better.***

The Psalmist proclaims that, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." A life full of goodness and mercy! Or, to use the words from today's Gospel: an "abundant life." What if the actual word the psalmist uses in Hebrew is better translated as *chase* or *pursue*? I did a little word study on the word translated as "follow" in our psalm. Another powerful way to translate the Hebrew word is chase or pursue! God's goodness and mercy shall chase me, pursue me, all the days of my life! Chased by mercy! Chased by goodness! Wow. What could be better?!

A few years back, I was in a wonderful conversation with an older person whose home I was visiting. We were talking about this and that. We got to looking at some pictures in the house, including some pictures of her and her husband back in their courtship and early marriage days. She reflected humorously and with affection that: "I chased him until he caught me." That's what God is like. God chases us until we turn to catch God.

In this time of unease, when we wonder what's next, when we can easily succumb to pessimism and fear-(and it's not wrong to be afraid, there are things to be afraid of, if not for ourselves, then on behalf of others) can we turn and pause, to see the goodness and mercy around us, and behind us, which we can't see because we are moving too fast or because we are too scared or too angry to see what or who is there for us?

I've noticed that we are being pursued by the magnificent goodness of the budding trees and unfolding flowers; I've noticed that we are being chased by inspiring accounts of merciful heroism, and small but profound acts of kindness-by medical professionals, restaurant and factory workers, delivery personnel; our neighbors. I've noticed that we are pursued by the amazing and generous and beautiful offerings of artists and musicians livestreamed on events like *unite.us* and *earthdaylive2020*; I've noticed that we are surrounded by the goodness and mercy offered to others on our behalf by ministries that we are particularly committed too- the MANNA ministry, the Needham Community Council, the B-Safe program at St. Stephens, Circle of Hope, and so many other profoundly impactful expressions of God's goodness and mercy-all set in motion by fellow human beings, created in the image of God, engaged in the good and merciful work of Jesus, whether they call it that or not-we can see it for what it is and take part in it as such.

And so, God, we ask You for eyes and hearts to apprehend the goodness and mercy that chase us, that pursue us, that surround us, on every side; And we ask for hearts and hands to share that goodness and mercy with all who need it.

Amen.

Sources consulted: Harold Kushner, [The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm](#); Interlinear On-line Bible.ss