

SURELY GOODNESS AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, November 4, 2018
based on Psalm 23:6a

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a fall sermon series on the twenty-third Psalm entitled, “Beside Still Waters.” We have seen in past weeks how David, the writer of the Psalm, describes God as a shepherd, who leads us and who is with us in the dark valley, *and* as a gracious host, who sets before us an abundant table and who fills our cup to overflowing. We have also noted how Biblical scholars believe that David wrote the twenty-third Psalm at the time of the rebellion of Absalom—a tragic event late in David’s life when David’s son Absalom launched a full-scale rebellion and attempted to seize his father’s throne. Seeing the twenty-third Psalm against the backdrop of Absalom’s rebellion puts a number of the statements in the Psalm in particularly sharp relief, and we will see that again this morning. Today our focus is on the first part of verse six: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” {prayer}

Two key words jump out at us in this verse. The first one is “goodness”—a word that people sometimes have thought of as a milquetoast sort of term. But right now in our nation and world, do we not long for goodness? Wouldn’t you like to look at the news one day and find that all the top stories are about goodness? Too often, in the continual human quest after wealth and power, goodness gets underrated. But clearly what the world desperately needs today is an increase in goodness!

The Bible says that goodness has its origin in God. The Psalms declare that “God is good” (Psalms 100:5, 107:1), and when God creates the universe, Genesis declares that “God saw that it [the creation] was good” (Genesis 1:4,10, 12, 18, 21, 25). The Hebrew word being translated as “good” in these passages and in Psalm 23 is the word טוֹב *tov*—which has the same basic meaning as our English word for goodness. It indicates that which is positive, beneficial, and morally upright. The clear message is that if the world is not good, it is because we have turned from God and departed from God’s design for human living. If we want a life that is authentically good, we need to look to God.

The second key word in Psalm 23 verse 6 is the word “mercy.” Here the English term “mercy” is partly getting at the underlying Hebrew word, but there is more to it. The original Hebrew word at this point is the word חֶסֶד *chesed*—which is one of the most important words in the entire Bible. It means “steadfast love”—love that never quits, love that never gives up even in the face of disappointment, love that is poured out even if it is undeserved. *Chesed* includes mercy and forgiveness and unbounded compassion. It is the number one word used in the Old Testament to describe the nature and character of God. Steadfast love is the sort of love that God continually shows toward the people of Israel, and the kind of love that God ultimately shows toward the whole world in Jesus. Even as human beings so often fall short of God’s goodness, God does not give up on us, but reaches to us with mercy

and compassion.

Tov and *chesed*—goodness and steadfast love—are very often used together in the Bible. Several Psalms, for example, contain the line, “O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever.” [Psalm 100:5, 106:1, 107:1, 118:1] This coupling of these two words is highly significant. In Jesus’ day, there were some people who thought of themselves as good—especially the Pharisees—because they held to a certain idea of righteous living; but they often did not treat other people in a loving fashion. Jesus challenged them at precisely that point, because according to Jesus, the good action is the loving action. This principle relates very much to our own time.

This past week the number one religious news item was the action of the Pakistan Supreme Court to free Asia Bibi. This made the headlines all over the world, though not so much in America, as we are so absorbed with the upcoming mid-term elections. You may be familiar with the case of Asia Bibi, who, way back in 2010, was condemned to death for supposedly insulting the prophet Mohammed. Asia is a Christian, a part of the tiny Christian minority in Pakistan which is often cruelly oppressed. She was working in fields one day along with some Muslim women, when the Muslim women refused to drink water from a container because Asia, a Christian, had touched it and thereby, in their view, fouled the water. There ensued some words between the women—the Muslim women pressed upon Asia that she should convert to Islam; Asia resisted. A few days later, a couple of the Muslim women accused Asia of blasphemy. Pakistan’s blasphemy law states that any derogatory remarks toward Mohammed must result in a mandatory death penalty. Asia was found guilty and sentenced to death, but she appealed the ruling. Through the years, prominent people tried to intercede on her behalf. In 2011, both the provincial governor, Salman Taseer, and the minister of minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, spoke out in Asia’s defense and criticized the use of the blasphemy law. They were both assassinated. Pope Benedict got involved; so did Pope Francis. Appellate courts continued to uphold the death sentence, until this week the Supreme Court reversed the sentence, setting the stage for Asia to go free. Many people in Pakistan, including many Muslims, applauded the ruling, longing for a more tolerant society. But immediately following the ruling, there were large marches of angry religious extremists, calling for Asia to be hanged, and also calling for the murders of all the judges on the court. After a few days of such marches, the central government of Pakistan caved in to the extremists, and is allowing for a “review” of the Supreme Court ruling; the government has also barred Asia from leaving the country. Asia’s lawyer has fled Pakistan, since otherwise he would surely be killed.

The people in those hate-filled crowds would want to think of themselves as the “good people” in that society. But the Biblical Word makes clear—the good people are those who are also merciful.

Jesus’ critique of the Pharisees—that those who imagine themselves to be pious and righteous are not good if they are also hateful—thus applies afresh to our own day. And of

course Jesus is speaking to each one of us, calling us to express authentic goodness by showing compassion and mercy—and not just toward our friends and family members, but toward people who are different from us and who are very imperfect, which of course is the kind of love God shows. We might conclude at this point that we all now should simply aspire to be more good and loving. That is fine; but our human problem is that we often fall short even of our own best aspirations. Yet right here David says something quite striking in the twenty-third Psalm when he continues and says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall *follow* me.” The Hebrew word translated “follow” is the verb, רָדַף *radaph*, which actually means “to pursue,” and it especially means to pursue relentlessly. In the Bible, the word is sometimes used to describe armies doggedly pursuing their opponents, or a person will speak of being pursued by enemies. David might have thought about how he was being pursued by Absalom and his rebel army. We might think of how problems are bearing down on us. But in Psalm 23, David says, “I am being pursued by goodness and mercy.” What an image—you are being chased, and chased relentlessly, by goodness and mercy!

This is a complete reversal of our usual way of thinking. Typically we might think of how *trouble* is chasing us; or if we think of goodness and mercy, we think of how *we need to pursue*—we need to strive after—goodness and mercy. But Psalm 23 says that God’s goodness and steadfast love are pursuing us! In fact, this is what the Biblical story again and again portrays. God in steadfast love relentlessly pursues the people of Israel, even as they often wander away from God. God keeps after them to show them His goodness and compassion. And God does this finally for the whole world in Jesus Christ. We are sinners, often failing to achieve goodness or live in love; we are like lost sheep wandering in a land of trouble. But in Christ, God pursues us; the Shepherd comes after us, to pour mercy upon us, to give us His goodness, and to guide us in steadfast love. If we wish, therefore, to live a life of goodness and mercy, it is not something we must accomplish on our own. We can know God’s love and be brought more and more into goodness and mercy as we open ourselves to how God is reaching to us with grace. Yet further, this theme brings hope for the whole world, for it means that no matter how bad things may get or how askew humanity may be, God is not giving up on us.

All this relates to the last part of the phrase, where it says that goodness and mercy will follow me *all the days of my life*. Here is a powerful declaration that God’s goodness and love never end. Even when we have times of serious trouble, such as David was certainly having during the rebellion of Absalom, we can know that God is reaching to us with goodness and help. Even when we stumble badly in life, we can know that God is at hand to lift us up. Even when we encounter death, we can have confidence that God’s goodness and mercy will be with us. This is a promise that comes then to its ultimate fruition in the final statement of the Psalm, which we will be considering in the closing sermon in this series next Sunday: “And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”