

“Goodness and Mercy in Pursuit”
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Carol Bechtel is a wonderfully creative biblical scholar, and she begins a meditation on the 23rd Psalm that invited new insight into these familiar words for me. With good humor, she likens the pace of our reading Psalm 23 to the annual piano recitals she dreaded as a child. No offense to piano teachers extraordinaire, Anne and Bill McNair, but many of us – myself included – may have stuck with piano lessons a bit longer – had it not been for the late Spring recital.

Bechtel writes, “My mother always claimed to enjoy these affairs. She would sit toward the back and try to match the parents to the pianists, based on blushes, coughs and general body language. I am glad she had a good time. I, on the other hand, would approach the bench with a martyred air, living only for the moment when the last notes were played. I suppose it was my longing for those last notes that made me speed up. Like a horse catching sight of a barn, I would break into a musical gallop as the piece drew to a close. No matter the intended tempo of the piece, toward the end – it went lickety-split.” (1)

And then she observes a similar phenomenon in the way we read Psalm 23. She has a point, doesn’t she?... How we linger over the images of the Shepherd, green pastures, still waters. How we are so often comforted in seasons of grief by the notion that we are never alone when “we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” It is natural for us to pause at those places, and to savor the confident trust they evoke that God’s companionship is a blessing in every situation. “It does not mean that there are no deathly valleys, no enemies. Psalm 23 acknowledges there is evil present in the world, but it is not to be feared as the ultimate reality. Come what may – the psalm proclaims confidence in God is the source of a life of peace and joy.” (2)

But when we get to the last verse, instead of savoring these words, do we not also speed up a little bit? “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...” where does the last verse of the Psalm tend to take us? Many of us go straight to those oft repeated jokes about the child’s misunderstanding of the words as referring to a kind neighbor and believing it says: “Surely good Mrs. Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life...” This familiar joke elicits more humor than comfort. But, remarkably, the child in the joke is actually onto something about the meaning of the text. The so-called “mistake” – personifies “goodness and mercy” as benevolent pursuers, dogging our footsteps wherever we go. (3)

Many of us could genuinely recount our childhood faith with a few “good-Mrs.-Murphy” stories, through whom we came to know the love of God, and to trust that God accompanies us both in seasons of green pastures as well as shadowy valleys.

Do you ever think now about how God follows you? Perhaps you've been too busy to notice. Or perhaps you've glanced back over your shoulder occasionally and had the sense that Somebody was indeed there. Whether we are aware of it or not, this verse reminds us that there is Someone tailing us. Two somebodies, in fact. The Hebrew says goodness and mercy actually *pursue* us. (4) And they are worth our slowing down for, to linger over what they mean, every bit as much as the lovely, pastoral images that come earlier in the psalm.

These are two of the Bible's weightiest words. "Goodness" is sometimes paralleled with "peace" and is often contrasted with "evil." "Mercy" means "steadfast love" or "loving kindness" – that kind of love that will not let us go. We are better off not to rush through reading these words. They are back there doing their job, hot on our trail through good times and bad, never letting us out of God's gracious sight. As Rabbi Harold Kushner has noted, "God's promise was never that life would be fair. God's promise was, when it's your turn to confront the unfairness of life, no matter how hard it is, you will be able to handle it, because he is on your side. God will give you the strength you need to find your way through." (5) Sometimes we think of faith in God, or spirituality, or religion as something we have to look for or go after ourselves. The truth of the matter is it is God who pursues us.

My friend Jon Walton, who serves the historic First Presbyterian Church in New York City, tells a story of one of his members being followed by the goodness and mercy of God. Brian was a quiet man, sweet in disposition, and unassuming about everything. His jobs were nondescript, sort of like his personality. He was a telephone marketer for a while; and had some other job after that fell through – maybe a clerk at a household goods store, hard to remember which one. You hardly knew that Brian was even around, Jon says, he made his presence so little known. He helped a lot part time at the church, serving meals and assisting the caterer when he was between jobs. He would bring trays of green beans, or casseroles, or potatoes au gratin and slip the pans into those heated servers while the steam rose around the edges. His apron was a bit large on his skinny body, wrapped almost double it seemed, around his bony frame. So unassuming, he was the kind of person you didn't always see. But at the church, they loved him and made him a deacon. He was, after all, a server of others, compassionate in nature, an observer of what life was doing to him, and therefore helpful in what life was doing to others. He called on the elderly women of the church, took Easter flowers to shut-ins, and felt at home ushering in worship. Helping people find a place was easy for him to do for others, even if he found it difficult for himself.

About a year ago he was diagnosed with the worst form of brain cancer. Brian went to the best places for treatment and read about every possible, experimental program and research trials. He signed up for them all; he so wanted to live. But after a year of surgery and radiation and laser cutting, time began to run out. As Advent came, this past December, a couple of women in the church became his angels, ministering to him each day in the hospital, taking turns, holding his hand, stroking his head, becoming his advocates, making others notice that Brian was slipping

away. Jon says they reminded him of the women who went to the tomb of Jesus, bearing spices and ointments to help – but did not know precisely what was needed. When he would arrive at the hospital, these women would slip away leaving Brian alone with his pastor. While Jon says his pastoral visits and prayers were important to Brian, what was most important was the ministry of those angels – who sat by his bedside, and held his hand, and kept watch beside him and noticed that he was slipping away.

Brian died at 7:30 in the morning on Christmas Day. Thinking back on this recent season of his ministry and that of his church, Jon said, “I found myself struggling through Brian’s illness to find words that might help him. I know after enough years of doing this that I have no words to help anyway, but it does not keep me from trying nonetheless. Most of the time I spent with Brian I prayed and tried not to get in the way of those angels and their care for him, and I waited. Maybe that was what I was supposed to do all along, stay out of the way and wait, a lesson Brian himself knew from experience. (6)

Because ... if we slow down and stand still long enough, and look from time to time over our shoulder and wait, we will see them. Goodness and mercy – which have been pursuing us all the days of our life, will catch up with us, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Carol M. Bechtel, “We’re Being Followed,” *Presbyterians Today*, 1998.
- 2) Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*.
- 3) John Hollander, essay on Psalms in *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*, p. 293 ff.
- 4) Bechtel. Again. p. 4.
- 5) Harold Kushner, “Religion and Ethics online,” pbs.org.
- 6) Jon Walton, Moveable Feast paper on the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1-12, 2011.