

“Goodness and Mercy Shall Follow”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 3, 2020

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Psalm 23 (KJV)

The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

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.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Acts 2:42-47 (NRSV)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds^[a] to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home^[b] and ate their food with glad and generous^[c] hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2 Footnotes:

- a. Acts 2:45 Gk *them*
- b. Acts 2:46 Or *from house to house*
- c. Acts 2:46 Or *sincere*

Sermon

There are good days and crummy days

A couple in Texas stepped outside to greet the morning sun,
then walked down their driveway to get the morning paper.
They noticed something was missing:
it was their plastic pink flamingo, gone from their front yard.
Who in the world would want--much less steal--their plastic pink flamingo?
*(Reminds me of the time someone welcomed themselves
to taking our welcome mat that said Welcome.
The theology alone is mind-boggling.)*

One year later to the day,
the Texans stepped outside to stretch & get the morning paper,
& their plastic pink flamingo was back,
planted in their front yard
right where she once stood.

Across her folded wings was a small photo album of Polaroid pictures.
Here she was, standing in front of the Taj Mahal.
The Eiffel Tower.
The Leaning Tower of Pisa.
The Great Wall of China.
The Brooklyn Bridge.
She had gone on a round-the-world trip and had the photos to prove it.
True story.

Crummy days, good days, the goodness and mercy of God are ever-present.
A mentor shared this truth with me, and I'll tell you his story.
First, who mentored you?
Who guided you to know the ever-present goodness and mercy of God?
Tell us, share with us, we want to know.
And if no one has, let us be the first, and may we not be the last.
God loves you, and we do, too.

Here is a mentor's story about the presence of God's goodness and mercy.

*"The Rev. Dr. George W. "Bill" Webber,
a former president of New York Theological Seminary
and a well-known leader in urban ministry,
[was born in 1920 and passed away in 2010 at age] 90.
Best known for his passion and work for faith-based justice,
Webber helped shape the perspective of several generations
of Protestant clergy engaged in urban ministry." [\[1\]](#)*

I consider myself richly blessed to have been raised in the light of his life.
Among many gifts and skills, Bill Webber was a teacher; he loved to teach the Faith.
That is Faith with a capital F.
Bill Webber taught students in seminary.

He taught men incarcerated in prison how to be ministers,
how to practice goodness and mercy.
He was on the UCC Commission on Ministry
that endorsed my ordination.

I heard Bill Webber preach, teaching my home congregation
how the 23rd Psalm was a staple, a centerpiece of his life.
He said he prayed the 23rd Psalm in most every worship service he presided.
That morning Bill Webber shared a personal vulnerability.
He preached that periodically he got a nagging feeling,
the kind many of us may experience every now and then,
when he wondered if he was making a difference.
We all have good days and crummy days,
and sometimes you wonder...does my life have meaning?
Am I making a difference?
What do my prayers and practices matter?
Do you feel that way sometimes?
I know I do, too.

Rev. Webber said one day a young man walked into his study.
He had been a teenager in Bill's church youth group.
Now he was all grown up, returning from boot camp
where he trained to be an Army Ranger.
The soldier said, "Pastor let me tell you what happened.
They took me and my platoon up in an airplane,
and said to put on parachutes, jump out the plane,
count to ten and pull the cord.
I was so scared.
I didn't want to jump.
The sergeant took me to the door and kicked me out.
I was so scared while I was falling,
I didn't do anything I was supposed to do,
like count to ten or pull the cord.
Then I remembered the prayer you and me and our church said together every Sunday.
I started to pray the 23rd Psalm.
I calmed down.
I remembered God was with me.
I pulled the cord, and my parachute opened,
and all the way down to the ground
I said the 23rd Psalm over and over again."

(Join with me, if you like...)

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:*

*he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
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.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

The 23rd Psalm's grounding is in the oft-told tale of King David.

David is credited as the writer of the 23rd Psalm.

He started as a shepherd in the fields of God

before he was anointed to shepherd the chosen people of God.

Imperfect, bold, flawed, brave, faithful, authentic, we can relate.

David had good days and crummy days, too.

King David would have been familiar with a certain passage of Scripture from Ezekiel.

The Prophet Ezekiel identified the qualities of God's love

as like that of a shepherd.

David could relate when Ezekiel pointed out that,

just as a shepherd guides and protects and cares for the flock,

so, too, does God lovingly watch over us, no matter what.

Feast, says Ezekiel, on the justice, goodness and mercy of God.

Ezekiel 34 tells us across time and space:

For thus says the Lord God:

I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.

As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep,

so I will seek out my sheep.

I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered...

...I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses,

and in all the inhabited parts of the land.

I will feed them with good pasture...

there they shall lie down in good grazing land,

and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed,

and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak,

but the fat and the strong I will destroy.

I will feed them with justice.

The Prophet Ezekiel, David the Shepherd King, Jesus Christ, our mentors—

they show us that God's goodness and mercy follow you, always.

A friend posted on FB recently:

"There are good days and there are crummy days, quarantine or no quarantine.
Today it was a crummy day over here.
My kiddo and I both felt grouchy, oppositional,
restless and short tempered today.
We tried all the things that usually work to cheer us both
but couldn't quite shake it. Some days are like that.

About 7 pm, [my child] stomped off to her bedroom and slammed the door.
A minute later, she threw out a doll that had been mine as a child
and slammed the door again.
My temper rising, I walked over to pick up the doll,
but before I could open my mouth to scold her for throwing toys,
she yelled angrily through the door,
*"There, Mommy. There is your doll.
You can cuddle with her.
It will help you feel better.
I would cuddle with you but I can't because I am too mad
so I am staying in my room!"*

This was a good reminder to me.
Most of us are doing the best we can
with a very complicated and difficult situation.
Many of us are operating with a pretty thin emotional reserve,
and yet, we still want to offer love to those around us.
It's not easy.
We are learning as we go.
Some days, we get big lessons.
I hugged the doll." (shared with permission from Andra Moran)

Some days are crummy, some are good.
Some days and nights teach us lessons,
lessons we may share about the goodness and mercy of God.

Yesterday the Blue Angels flew over Atlanta to express gratitude
for medical personnel and first responders.

We disciples of Jesus Christ have ways of offering thanksgiving as well.

First Christian Church of Decatur hosted a powerful service of healing

for hospice caregivers, nurses and chaplains.
Think about it.
Every patient that a hospice caregiver ministers to
passes from this life into the next.
We wondered, "Who ministers to the ministers of healing?
Who cares for the wounded healers?"
The late Rev. Adei Grenpastures took the point and planned a worship service
early on a weekday morning.
Hospice caregivers from across Atlanta came together for prayer in our Chapel.
During the service every hospice caregiver was invited to come forward
to be anointed with healing oils and for the laying on of hands and prayer.
Two Elders served as guides to walk alongside
the caregivers, nurses and chaplains
as they came forward, one at a time.
Adei Grenpastures said one Elder guide was Mercy and the other was Goodness.

You see, God's Goodness and Mercy walk with us.
The Word has been made manifest in Christ and in you and me.
Divine Presence and Peace are incarnate in the here and now,
God's love with some skin on it,
for days that are good and days that are crummy.

God's grace is ample for this and every need.
Max Lucado describes the sufficiency of God's grace this way:

Imagine we are all passengers on an airplane.
Suddenly the pilot rushes out of the cockpit.
The pilot exclaims, "We're going to crash! We have to bail out!
Here, there are enough parachutes for everyone!"
The first passenger makes a request. "Any way I can get a pink one?"
The pilot shakes his head in disbelief.
"Isn't it enough that I gave you a parachute at all?"
So, then the first passenger takes it and jumps.
The second asks, "Any way you can keep me from getting airsick as I fall?"
"No, but I can ensure that you will have a parachute while you fall."
One after another every passenger asks for goggles, or boots,
or to wait for later, or to change the plans,
or to overcome a fear of falling.
"You people don't understand," says the pilot.
"I have given you a parachute; that is enough!"

Only one item is necessary for the jump, and it is provided.
God places the only strategic tool necessary right into our hands.
God's gift of grace is adequate; it is sufficient.

Are we content with what God provides in days that may be good or crummy?
No, says Max Lucado, we are anxious, restless, even demanding.
Yet God loves us so much that God gives us goodness and mercy,
and -- with a bright-as-a-rainbow canopy of love --
suspends us in the grip of grace.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[\[1\]](#) The Christian Post, July 10, 2010.