

**Misericordias Domini (The Third Sunday of Easter)****14 April 2024****Psalm 23****Blessed Pursuit**

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—Amen

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

Today, Misericordias Domini, is sometimes also known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” It is probably obvious from the appointed Scripture readings and the Hymn of the Day why that would be so. The one appointed reading you have not yet heard today is the appointed psalm. It is probably little surprise that the psalm appointed for today is the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm.

“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 for ever.”

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” I’ll save you all the Hebrew nerddom, but even the most beloved King James Version translation of this portion of the psalm is just a little ‘off.’ It’s easy to understand why the translators would soften it the way they did, buy the word form being translated “shall follow” is fairly straightforward. It means “to pursue with hostile intent.” That’s the word which describes what goodness and mercy are doing. So, a more literalistic translation of that part of the Psalm would be: “Goodness and mercy

will pursue me with hostile intent all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

That's right, dear Christian friends. You're in big trouble. They're coming for you, and they're absolutely relentless. They will not stop, they will not be pushed aside, and you will not escape from them.

Goodness and mercy have picked up your scent, and they will have their way with you. If I were you, I'd save my breath and stop running. I'd let the dynamic duo catch me. Why put off the inevitable? In the end, giving in would probably save a lot of trouble.

But who are we kidding? We're not going to give in. We'll run harder. We'll make our strides longer. We'll train more aggressively. We'll become more disciplined. If we work hard enough we might be able to leave goodness and mercy in the dust. All we need is a "can-do" attitude.

Remarkably, that's how it is with all of us. God sends His goodness and mercy after us. They run us down, knock us over, and maul us with every blessing imaginable. They set the table with a feast. They try to pour a whole bottle of wine into our glass. They destroy our enemies and protect us from those who hate us.

And we run. We try to jump into every ravine. We try to dash our bodies against the rocks. We slash our arm so that the wolves and bears will get scent of our blood. We do everything we possibly can to escape the good things which God sends after us.

God sends His forgiveness to us in the absolution. We say, "How dare that man think he can forgive our sins." Or we think about that one thing which we consider so bad that it can't be forgiven, and we try to hold it outside of the Lord's mercy. Goodness and mercy pursue us at the very beginning of the Divine Service, and we try our best to escape.

God sends the forgiveness again as we sing about it in the hymn of praise, ask for it in the kyrie, rejoice in it in the collect, and hear it in the readings from Holy Scripture. There is nowhere to run—nowhere to hide. God’s mercy is ever-present in the liturgy. We can’t get away. But we sure do try.

We check our social media on our smartphones. We text each other about how dumb the preacher’s jokes are today. We test our skill at sleeping with our eyes open. We think about where we’re going for lunch after the service.

Then comes the sermon. The Law leaves us dead in our sins. It wakes our guilt and makes us bow before the Lord in contrition and terror. But then, goodness and mercy come at us again: Jesus nailed to a cross for you. Your sin forgiven. Your death killed. The power of the devil destroyed. Life for you. Peace for you. Innocence for you.

And what do we do? We check our email. We enter REM sleep for the second time in the service. We wonder when the pastor is going to get on with it. We say, “Oh, come on... It can’t be that easy can it?” And so, we dodge and duck. Goodness and mercy keep coming at us, and we manage to slip away.

But our Lord’s goodness and mercy are relentless. They come at us again from His table. He gives us His body to eat and His blood to drink. But we try to defend ourselves from the forgiveness, life, and salvation we’re being offered. We use doubt as a defense. We ask, “Did God really say that this is His body? Did He really mean that this is His blood? Can eating a little wafer and drinking a sip of wine really turn us sinners into saints who are holy and blessed before the Lord and Creator of the Universe?”

The answer, of course, is yes. And even faith such as a mustard seed will receive all the blessings which are pursuing you in the Supper. In it, our Lord catches us in a way which we can only avoid through the most stubborn unbelief.

The reason we run from God's goodness and mercy is that we don't want to admit our need for it. We don't want even to think that we might be wretched enough to be forgiven. We want the cross to be for someone else—maybe someone next to us or a couple of pews away, maybe someone who's not here. They're the ones who need forgiveness. Goodness and mercy don't need to waste their time on us. We're fine, thankyouverymuch.

But no; no we're not. We are so far down in the muck that we can't even see it. Our situation is so dire that we can't even see the bloody cross which is right in front of us proclaiming that God's wrath has been turned aside and that we are forgiven and free.

Sin numbs us to reality. We get so used to our misery that we run away from that which could put an end to it. We like the disease so much that we turn aside the cure. We think it's just the way the world works. It's natural. It's the way it is. Why fight against nature? We can't possibly win.

Right. We can't win, but God can. We can't rescue ourselves from this body of death, but Jesus already has. Our Good Shepherd has come to the ravine and lifted us up. He has smitten the wolf with His sling and slain the bear with His staff.

Jesus is absolutely dogged in His pursuit of those for whom He died. He never gives up. He never surrenders. He never stops until He has shown us the depth of our sin and brought us out of our self-chosen purgatory at the cost of His own precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.

That's right. It is Jesus who pursues you. When I said the Lord's goodness and mercy were coming for you, I didn't mean some vague feeling of well-being and forgiveness. God doesn't work that way. He doesn't give theoretical well-being. He doesn't win imaginary health for you.

Jesus is goodness and mercy made flesh. He is goodness and mercy with bone connected to bone. He is goodness with sinews and mercy with flesh. He is filled with the Holy Spirit, the very breath of life, and He comes at you with all His gifts—absolutely everything He won for you on the cross. He took on your sin, your fear, and even your hatred of Him. He suffered what you deserve on the cross. He paid the price you couldn't pay so that you could receive what you could never earn.

You can't escape. Jesus is coming. He is waiting for the full number of the elect to receive the gift of faith, and then He will descend on the clouds. The dead in Him will rise first, and then we who are alive will meet Him in the air. Goodness and mercy will have their way with us, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

It is sure. It is certain. It is every bit as much of a done deal as our Lord's death and resurrection for us are. Stop running, dear Christian friends. Let Jesus catch you. His goodness and mercy will always pursue you relentlessly. In Him, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus—  
Amen

Sermon based on one by the Rev. Charles Lehmann