

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
Easter 4 (C) ~ May 11, 2025  
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda  
Acts 9:36-43  
Psalm 23  
John 10:22-30

*Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of God for ever.  
In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

I wonder if you have had this experience:

You are driving around town, or around the beltway, and you happen to glance in the rear-view mirror and see a police car following you. The lights and siren aren't on (yet), but there's that cruiser – a respectable car length behind, yet too close for comfort, nevertheless. Now yes, maybe you are going just a hair above the posted speed limit, or maybe you did breeze through just as that last light was turning red, but it wasn't really that bad. Your heart begins to beat a little faster, you hold your breath and say a prayer, bargaining with God that if you just get a pass this time, you promise never to speed again.

You just want that car to turn off, or to pull ahead of you, going after someone else.

Or so I've been told...

It's unsettling, that feeling that someone is after you. Whether you've done anything wrong or not, suddenly you become hyper-aware of every infraction.

The relief when that cruiser moves on could not be sweeter. Off the hook – for now.

I wonder, too, if this isn't how many people see God: As a cosmic law enforcement officer, always watching and waiting for the next misstep. We may have gotten it into our heads that God is, quite simply, out to get us, like Inspector Javert relentlessly, doggedly, hunting Jean Valjean through the bowels of Paris...just for stealing a loaf of bread.

Over the course of my ministry, I have met more folks than I can count who understand God to be harsh, judgmental, and punitive, just waiting around the next corner to reprimand them for their failings. The standard is perfection, and anything less is unacceptable.

So they go through life holding their breath, hoping upon hope that God never catches up with them.

Good luck with that.

There are so many problems with this worldview – not the least of which is that, for us humans, perfection is impossible, and the quest for perfection can eat away at us. As Brené Brown so wisely puts it, “when perfectionism is driving, shame is riding shotgun.”<sup>1</sup> The perfect really is the enemy of the good.

And, more importantly, believing in a harsh, judgmental, and punitive God tends to make for harsh, judgmental, and punitive people. We are created in the image of God, after all.

I can see how religion sometimes gets a bad name. Who wants to believe in a God like that? Who wants to hang out with a bunch of people like that?

No, thank you.

Beloveds, I stand before you this morning to refute that bad theology, that misunderstanding of God as harsh, judgmental, and punitive. It is simply wrong.

It is rare for me to be quite so declarative from the pulpit: Good Episcopalian that I am, I tend to eschew black-and-white absolutes, preferring instead to dwell in the middle, in the gray.

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<sup>1</sup> Brené Brown, *Rising Strong* (Random House, 2015).

But in this case, there is no room for equivocation.

God is not a cosmic law enforcement officer, always watching and waiting for our next misstep. I would stake my very soul on this. In fact, I have.

I pray that God will erase that image from your mind's eye, once and for all.

Because ours is the God of invitation, not invective – of love, not legalism.

Ours is the God of life, not death.

Hear again these words from the Psalmist, that we recited together a few minutes ago:

*Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of God for ever.*

The twenty-third psalm is among the most cherished and best-known texts in all of Scripture. And it's little wonder, given its beautiful imagery of green pastures and still waters and overflowing cups. But it's on that last line – Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life – that I'd like to linger for a moment.

Because far from being beautiful or pastoral, the word “follow” here actually means to “pursue, persecute, [or] run after”; to “chase,” “dog,” or “harass.”<sup>2</sup>

Think about that for a moment: God's goodness and mercy persistently, doggedly pursuing us – us fallible, broken humans.

Pursuing with that same relentless intensity and focus that we might attribute to that police cruiser behind us on MacArthur Boulevard.

How does that change things?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/radaph.html>

I wonder if that creates any cognitive dissonance for you – especially if your experience of the world has taught you to obey (and fear) a harsh, judgmental, and punitive God.

Or, worse yet, if your experience of the world has taught you to avoid, to evade, to hide out from that God, like Jean Valjean running from Inspector Javert.

*Catch me if you can.*

Imagine: God pursuing you to shower you with goodness and mercy, not giving up until you stop long enough to receive, to take in, those gifts.

Imagine: God as the seeker – whether sought, or not.

Imagine: God “dogging” you, not to harm you but to love you.

Not to cast you out, but to invite you in.

Imagine.

One of the persistent themes that runs through Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is of God “hunting down” the runaway, the one filled with shame or guilt or remorse, the one who believes that she or he has nothing to offer God.

Remember Adam and Eve, who “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden [of Eden],” until God asked, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:8-9).

Remember Hagar, who was running away from Abraham and Sarah when God discovered her by a spring of water in the wilderness and asked, “Where have you come from and where are you going?” (Genesis 16:7-8).

Remember Moses, who fled Egypt after committing murder, only to be found by God in the wilderness and commanded, “Now, go! I am sending you to Pharaoh so that you can bring my people Israel out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:10).

Or remember Saul, whom we saw just last Sunday “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” until confronted by Jesus Himself, who asked, “Why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:1, 4).

There seems to be a pattern here: The hunter becomes the hunted; the pursuer becomes the pursued.

*Catch me if you can.*

God caught up to me when I was 24 years old. Having been a Christian all my life, having attended Church faithfully all through adolescence, all throughout high school and college, one day I just – stopped. I was living on my own for the first time, starting out in my professional life. My story was that I couldn’t find a parish that I liked in my new town...but if I’m being really honest the truth is that I was hiding out. I wasn’t feeling very good about myself back then, and I made some choices that – I was convinced – put me outside the bounds of God’s love.

That was the narrative I told myself. That’s how I justified running away from God.

But don’t you know that God’s goodness and mercy persistently, doggedly pursued me – fallible, broken human that I was.

After a year or more of holding God at arm’s-length, I began to sense that something was missing. There was a hole within me that I couldn’t fill with interesting friends, or international travel, or invigorating grad school classes.

It was a primitive ache, a longing that I did not see coming. I am reminded of that famous line from St. Augustine, who wrote

*“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”*<sup>3</sup>

I knew that restlessness firsthand. I was flailing around, looking for solace in all the wrong places – until one day, for reasons that I still to this day cannot explain, I decided to confide in a colleague at work. He listened without judgment, and a

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<sup>3</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*

little while later he and his wife invited me to go to an event at their Church with them. (It actually was choir practice, Diane!)

And the rest is history.

God kept pursuing me – kept “harassing” me, in the way that only God can – kept inviting me into relationship, kept inviting me into service.

To borrow language from Nadia Bolz-Weber, who is quoted on page two of your bulletin, “there [was] nothing about [me] that [made me] the right person to do something” for God.

To do anything for God, really.

Yet God’s goodness and mercy kept on following me – no matter how hard I tried to run away.

Over and over again, God asked,

*“Where are you?”*

*“Where have you come from and where are you going?”*

In other words,

*“Why are you hiding?”*

God asks me that a lot – and I never seem to have a good answer.

That’s the thing: It’s not a “one and done” question.

God keeps pursuing, keeps asking, keeps inviting.

So, friends: Where are you this morning?

I obviously can see that you are here, physically, but where is your heart? Is it in hiding? Is it running away from God?

Are there places in your life that you try to conceal from God?

If so, then I invite you to stop running, if only for a few moments this morning, to let God – God’s goodness and mercy – catch up with you.

Allow yourself to receive, to take in, those gifts.

And...Ask yourself if there is someone in your life who needs to receive those gifts, too. How might you be exactly the right person to invite him or her in to experience God’s love?

How might you help refute any bad theology that person may have swallowed over the years?

What life-changing difference might you make to someone else, like my colleague and his wife did so long ago?

Friends, surely God’s goodness and mercy are following us – dogging us, hunting us, pursuing us – all the days of our lives. Thanks be to God!

*Amen.*