

Easter 4B

Pastor Wayne Peterson

Psalm 23

April 29, 2012

The first six years of my life my family lived out in the country near East Chain, MN, a small community between Fairmont and the Iowa line. My dad was pastor at East Chain Lutheran Church at that time. And it was there that my mom met one of her dearest friends. Her name was Melba Kittleson.

Melba wasn't around all the time because she served as a missionary in Bolivia. In Bolivia she worked among the native people, teaching them and sharing her love of the Lord. One of the things I remember most about Melba when I was growing up was her musical ability. She isn't a trained musician, but she has the ability to play by ear, and she can play both the piano and the accordion. The accordion was especially helpful in Bolivia because she could bring it with her to the villages around La Paz and always have music available to lead worship services.

After my family moved to Cokato, Melba often would come to visit. On one of those visits she met her future husband and she now lives in Cokato herself. She'll be 87 years old next month. But in those first years she would come and visit once and awhile and I can remember her sitting down at our piano and playing song after song, and I was so impressed because she never had any music in front of her.

One of the songs I recall her playing was written in the 1950's by John W. Peterson and was well known to those who watched the Billy Graham Crusades on television. It had a chorus that went, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me, all the days, all the days of my life."

That song popped into my head this week as I was re-reading Psalm 23 and I realized that Melba's gospel song was quoting the end of the 23rd Psalm.

It's a rather comforting image to have God's goodness and mercy follow us, have them close by just in case we need them. But I once learned that there is another way to translate this line. The word translated "follow" can also mean "pursue", and the passage can mean "surely goodness and mercy pursue me."

The same word is used to describe how the army of Pharaoh pursued the children of Israel to the Red Sea. In Psalm 18, King David describes one of his victories using this word to say, "I pursued my enemies and overtook them." So we can read in Psalm 23, "Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me, all the days of my life."

What an intriguing image! Here we are, plodding through life, and we look over our shoulder to see goodness and mercy tagging along. Or are they really keeping a safe distance? Maybe they're gaining on us. Maybe God's goodness and mercy are intent on capturing us.

It doesn't matter how well we think we know the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 – we don't really know him until we realize he is a pursuer. There's a difference between being "followed" and "pursued." There's a difference between looking back over our shoulder and finding dear old, predictable goodness with mercy in tow, trudging up the hill behind us, and being jumped by a breathless goodness and mercy that say "Gotcha!"

"The Lord is my shepherd," we say. The shepherd leads us down to the quiet, level pasture, knows where to find the slow-moving, restful brook whereby we can pause and be refreshed. But then Jesus told us about the shepherd who, when just one stupid sheep strayed from the fold, left the ninety-nine out in the wilderness and pursued the one lost sheep until he found it. The shepherd pursued until he found the lost.

The shepherd is always out seeking, pursuing. We wander down crooked paths, bob like jetsam down some raging river, he meets us there, pursues us, even into the valley, until he says "Gotcha!"

There once lived a man whom all his neighbors knew to be mean, resentful, and bitter. Someone said that his bitterness was justified. His beloved wife had died giving birth to their one child. The child died shortly thereafter from complications. "He has reason to be bitter," they said in town.

The man never went to church. Never had anything to do with anyone. When, in his late sixties, they carried him out of his apartment and over to the hospital to die, no one visited, no flowers were sent. He went there to die alone.

There was this nurse there. Well, she wasn't actually a nurse yet, just a student nurse. She was in training and because she was in training she didn't know everything yet that they teach you in school about the need for distance with your patients. She befriended the old man. It had been so long since he had friends, he didn't know how to act with one. He told her, "Go away! Leave me alone!"

She would smile and try to coax him to eat his Jell-O. At night, she would tuck him in. "Don't need nobody to help me," he would growl.

Soon, he grew so weak he did not have the strength to resist her kindness. Late at night, after her duties were done, she would pull up a chair and sit by his bed and sing to him as she held his old, gnarled hand. He looked up at her in the dim lamp light and wondered if he saw the face of a little one whom he never got to see as an adult. And a tear formed in his eye when she kissed him goodnight. For the first time in forty, maybe fifty years, he said, "God bless you."

As she left the room, two others remained. They approached the bed, one on each side, and bent over and whispered softly in the old man's ear the last word he heard before he slipped away into the dark valley of death: "Gotcha!" The word was whispered in unison by Goodness and Mercy.

There are many hymn settings of the 23rd Psalm, but since we've already heard one of them, I'm not going to have us sing the psalm again. Instead, we're going to sing another hymn which sings about God's relentless pursuit of us -- #834, "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise." Pay special attention to the second stanza:

Unresting, unhasting [without haste, deliberate], and silent as light,  
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;  
thy justice like mountains high soaring above  
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue us all the days of our life, until a persistent, deliberate, unhasting God wraps us in love and says, "Gotcha!"