

## **PRAYER OF PREPARATION**

*Let us Pray:*

Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.  
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,  
that we may serve you today and always. Amen

## **PURSUED**

So today's sermon was supposed to be a lead up to our Conversation Project workshop that will be taking place next week after church. The goal of the Conversation Project is an important one: its aim is to help us initiate conversations with our loved ones about how we want the end of our lives to be, letting them know what matters to us most.

But then on Thursday, a pair of ISIS suicide bombers struck southern Beirut, killing 43 and injuring over 200 others.

And then on Friday, ISIS suicide bombers launched a similar attack in Baghdad, killing 26 people and injuring dozens of others.

And then, on Friday night, ISIS unleashed an even larger-scale attack in Paris. More than 120 people were killed after terrorists opened fired at a concert venue and at two restaurants in the city center.

In the wake of such violence –  
when the phrase “that kind of thing won’t happen in our country” isn’t something we can say with much conviction,  
when the very idea that we can discuss and make plans for the way that we’ll exit this world feels self-indulgent, if not self-delusional –  
in the the wake of such violence, it seems almost quaint to read Psalm 23.

This much beloved Psalm, with it's imagery of shepherd, rod and staff, of green pastures and still waters, offers us a gentle assurance of God's abiding presence with us.

When read in unison, as it often is at funerals, Psalm 23 is meant to affirm our faith in God even when we're mourning the loss of someone we love.

But after a week like this one, saturated in violence like it was, elevating our anxieties and worst fears like it did, gentle assurances don't seem quite up to snuff.

This morning though, I would like to lift up just one verse in particular from this Psalm: verse 6. Specifically the first half of that verse.

As most of you have probably memorized it, or at least most often heard it read, this verse begins:

*Surely goodness and mercy shall **follow me** all the days of my life...*

But the version of the text that we read today, which comes from the Jewish Publication Society and is a translation widely accepted by modern scholars, offers a slightly but importantly different translation of this verse. It reads like this:

*Only goodness and steadfast love shall **pursue me** all the days of my life...*

The key difference between these translations is the difference between the word *follow* and the word *pursue*.

The difference between these two words is the difference between a puppy and a wolf.

A puppy will follow you from room to room.

A puppy likes you, so it tags along behind you with no particular aim or intention in mind. It just wants to be close to you.

A wolf will likewise follow you from room to room.

But you better believe that when a wolf is tailing you it has a very specific purpose in mind.

It's not just tagging along behind you because it kinda likes you - it's trying to catch up to you and overtake you.

While I'm not suggesting that the love of God is in any way trying to ingest us, I do believe that this distinction between *follow* and *pursue* can offer us a word of hope even after the tragedies of this week.

Here it is: God's goodness and love, God's steadfast love, is pursuing us. It's chasing after us and it's chasing after us doggedly. Perhaps better put: it's chasing after us wolfedly. According to Psalm 23, God's goodness and love doesn't just passively follow behind us. They're actively chasing after us. They're trying to overtake us all moments. Day and night, night and day, we can hear their panting just behind us if we'd only just listen.

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What does this actually mean for us? It means that at every moment we can choose to let God's goodness and love work in us and through us. At every moment, every moment, we can choose whether or not we want to be and an instrument, a tool, a vessel of God in the world.

This plays out in moments both big and small:

*Did you really need to make that snide remark about your significant other's driving?*

*Did you really need to join in that gossip fest about your coworker?*

*Did you really need to cut off that person to get to the cashier first at the supermarket?*

What's more is that this choice that we have – the choice to let God's goodness and love flow through us – is a choice that is that is universally available. Young or old, rich or poor, male or female this is an opportunity available to all people.

As unjust as it may feel in this moment, it ABSOLUTELY needs to be said that God's goodness and God's love were pursuing even the suicide bombers and gunmen who unleashed their violence on innocent lives on Thursday and Friday.

Up until the very moment that they ignited their explosives,  
up until the very moment that they pulled the triggers of their guns,  
they had the opportunity instead to let God's love and mercy work through  
them. They chose differently. That was their choice, not God's will.

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Friends, each of our lives is just a series of moments – big moments and little moments, consequential moments and not so consequential ones. But each of these moments is alike in that they are each a rich, beautiful opportunity for us to let the goodness and love that is chasing us pour forth through us and into the world – or not.

Put in this light, the goal of the Conversation Project workshop that we will offer after church next week, is not to delude us into thinking we can control how and when we'll leave this world. After this week, that we can't even pretend that we could. Rather, the goal of the Conversation Project is to help ready ourselves here and now so that God's love might flow through us even as we transition out of this life.

May we have the courage we need to let goodness and love work through us even in our last moments. Amen.

## **PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING**

*Let us pray:*

Thanks be to you, O God, for from the beginning you have entrusted us with your word and have called us to give heart, mind, voice, and love to serving its truth. In Jesus' name, amen.