

Green Pastures, Dark Valleys, and the Mercy of the Lord – Psalm 23

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On a recent sunny spring day, cardinals and meadowlarks, flit through the wooded patch between Kenilworth Marsh and the Anacostia River near Washington, D.C. A serpentine concrete bike and foot path winds through this pastoral stretch just blocks from a dense working-class neighborhood, but nobody is there.

Steps away, a dozen or so neighbors jog and power walk on a synthetic city track. Walkers and bikers say they are afraid of the path through the woods after a series of recent attacks. Cliff Robinson paused to explain to the Wall Street Journal.

“Because of those turkeys!” says Mr. Robinson, 70, a retired court-services employee. “I was attacked there. Three weeks ago. I was trying to get away from him and he came after me.”

The suspect: a male, heavysset, 3½-feet tall, with a blue head and neck, pink flaps on his chin that turn red when he struts, shiny black and fluorescent breast feathers and a large fanned bronze tail. The weapons: sharp beak and talons used to slash victims in the legs and thighs. The victims: more than a dozen walkers and bikers, including several who have required urgent medical care, tetanus shots and antibiotics.

“There is an element of humor to it,” said Dan Rauch, a D.C. Department of Energy & Environment wildlife biologist, part of a team trying to catch the perpetrator. “There is a terror turkey stalking a river trail. If I hadn’t seen the videos myself, I would have thought it was an urban myth.”

This being the nation’s capital, a multiagency task force of more than half a dozen agencies has assembled a dragnet across city, state and federal lands to cage the wily bird.

Wild turkeys are making a comeback across the country, after nearly going extinct a century ago. Because of this, there’s been an uptick in unhappy encounters with the public.

Outside Boston in November 2020, Liz Poulette said she was on her way to a Dunkin' for coffee (large, iced, cream, one Splenda) when a wild turkey began tailing her. "I had started walking backwards to keep an eye on it, not wanting to make any sudden moves," Ms. Poulette said in an email. "When it was a few feet away, suddenly it jumped at me. Like out of some cartoon, I had to use my purse to beat it back." She sustained scratches on her arm.

Meanwhile, back in D.C., social media and local broadcasts have been plump with reports of encounters with the chasing bird. "I was chased by this guy back in November for a solid quarter mile at relatively high speed," one person posted online. (Turkeys can run at a speed of up to 25 mph.) "I was lucky to be on my bike, not sure how this would've ended had I been on foot before he finally gave up at the bridge."

And another of the turkey's targets wrote back in February:

"A wild turkey attacked me on the Anacostia trail last night. I ended up at urgent care with puncture wounds on my legs and I had to get a tetanus shot and antibiotics. It was terrifying."

One elderly woman told a park ranger she warded the turkey off with a fanny pack, another with a rolled-up plastic fence.

Wild turkeys, friends, are in hot pursuit these days.

Have you ever been chased by somebody or something? I'm not talking about wild game like turkeys. And no, ladies, I don't mean some cute guy that was overly-aggressive in pursuing your heart. No, guys, I don't mean the rest of the pack trying to overtake you in the annual community road race that you once led at the two-mile mark. And no, I don't mean any of you aggressive drivers who've had to relent to the pursuit of a highway patrol officer needing to ticket you for speeding.

No, I mean have you ever been chased by something else—followed by some entity that won't give up on its pursuit of you? Maybe it's been an employer who was relentless in trying to hire you. Maybe you've been followed and chased by the memory of a painful experience in your past. Or maybe you can't shake the overwhelming pursuit of your conscience, trying to get you to admit a mistake you've long denied making.

They're always there, it seems, this feeling, this memory, this force. We can't shake them (the overly aggressive potential employer notwithstanding). They're always urging, pushing, needling us. They never fall back, disappear, or cease to make their presence felt.

Through all phases of life, however, including exhilarating highs and discouraging lows, God would want us to remember what the psalmist wrote. There is a force following us—chasing us even—that will be with us for the rest of our days. It is goodness and mercy, born out of the womb of a loving and gracious God.

We struggle at times to find the right metaphor that accurately depicts the goodness and mercy of God. But on this Mother's Day, there's no better illustration than that of a devoted mother doing everything she can to protect and train her treasured offspring.

Throughout scripture, God is depicted as a loving parent.

"In so many passages, God is described as loving his children wildly and without restraint. Like a loving mother, God has a long memory, holds the stories of her babies, resists complacency and insists on courage, growth, and risk-taking. God does this with wisdom: hovering, launching, supporting, and guiding. God longs to give and receive affection and aches when his children refuse his embrace. She groans in labor, giving herself over to shattering pain to bring new life into the world." (Debie Thomas, *Christian Century*, May 4, 2022)

Like a devoted mom, God trails us all the time—following, chasing, pursuing from just the right distance. But unlike a tom Turkey, God doesn't look to strike, endanger, or bring harm. God's goodness and mercy simply follow us all the days of our lives.

Today, five of our youth are making their public professions of faith in Jesus Christ. Over the last many months, they've examined some of the great qualities that this God in three persons exhibits. In God the Father, they were reminded how God creates, how God is majestic, and omnipotent, and always present. In God the Son, they were reminded how God came to be one of us and in doing so taught, related, forgave, sacrificed, and knows what's it like when we go through our own pain. And in God the Holy Spirit, they were assured that Jesus is alive today by a

Spirit that is all around us—trailing us, pursuing us, chasing us so that we are never alone.

If there's one characteristic that would seem to be most pertinent in a Being we pledge our allegiance to, it would be that of a loyalty and utter devotion to never giving up on us. And that's what Jesus does for these young people. In their growing and evolving, their questioning and sometimes even their doubting, in their straying and ambivalence, in their faithfulness and obedience, they will always have a God whose love and mercy abound, is never far away, and does chase them in dogged pursuit.

In his *Essential Teachings on Love*, Richard Rohr said, "The only people who change, who are transformed, are people who feel safe, who feel their dignity, and who feel loved. When you feel loved, when you feel safe, and when you know your dignity, you just keep growing! This kind of love is far from sentimental; it has real power."

The goodness and mercy of the Lord that follows us all the days of our lives helps us to always feel loved, safe, and dignified. And when we sense that, we stand a good chance of growing.

It's interesting that much of the time, when we talk of following in a faith context, we're called to follow Jesus. Jesus said in John 20, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

Indeed, anybody declaring their faith in Jesus is bound to be a follower of the Good Shepherd. For he is the one who leads, corrects, and protects. Yet, there's something unique about acknowledging that the goodness and mercy of the Lord follows us all the days of our lives. Wherever we go, whatever we do, no matter if the path is scary or benign, there's a force for good trailing us that will never fall off.

In both green pastures and dark valleys, that reassuring force is always there—always chasing, always pursuing, always present.