

February 21, 2021
Psalm 25:1-10

Lent 1
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Teach Me Your Paths”

“Make me know your way, O LORD; teach me your paths.”

The Appalachian Trail is a 3,500 km hiking trail that extends from Maine to Georgia. Every year, the trail is enjoyed by thousands of people, everyone from day trippers to “through hikers” who walk the entire trail and are often very colourful characters. My experience with the Appalachian Trail was as a Boy Scout as our troop took a day hike on the New Jersey portion of the trail. Thankfully, our scoutmaster planned for our troop to be led by an experienced trail guide who led us on our hike and was well-versed in reading trail markings and helping us avoid getting lost in some tricky areas where an inexperienced hiker could easily take a wrong turn. Being guided along this hiking path made our day on the Appalachian Trail very memorable – and very safe. The importance of an experienced, trustworthy guide is critical in many areas of life beyond a wilderness trail. It can be when we embark on a journey and rely on someone to give us clear directions so that we reach our destination safely. It can be a conductor of an orchestra or choir who leads all the musicians in the successful performance of a piece of music. It can be a teacher or a mentor who guides us in learning so that we can develop skills and knowledge that will benefit us and others. Being led by a trustworthy guide can help us grow and enjoy life while also safeguarding us from the perils that we might face if we went out on our own or with someone who was either inexperienced or would purposely lead us into danger.

The people of Israel had learned the importance of placing themselves in the care of trustworthy guides throughout their history, as well as the cost of falling into the hands of an untrustworthy or incompetent leader. They had been blessed by faithful leaders such as Moses, Joshua, and David who had their best interests at heart and fulfilled God’s call in guiding the people and serving as a trustworthy shepherd. They had also, unfortunately, also had experience with bad shepherds, incompetent leaders who failed to fulfill the responsibility that God had entrusted to them to lead the people of God. It is not wonder that Ezekiel speaks God’s word of judgment on these incompetent, unfaithful leaders who brought great distress and suffering on the people God had chosen as the means through which “*all families of the earth shall be blessed*” (Genesis 12:3):

- “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue the sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.” – Ezekiel 34:7-10.

In place of these unfaithful shepherd-kings who have all too often failed to be faithful guides for the people, God promises that God will be the one who will be the trustworthy guide for God’s own people:

- “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.” – Ezekiel 34:11-12.

The people of Israel knew that the Lord was the “good shepherd,” the one in whom they could place all of their trust and confidence, the one who would “*lead them in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake*” (Psalm 23:3). This trust in the faithfulness of God is at the heart of the prayer for guidance and deliverance that is Psalm 25, in which the psalmist entrusts her entire being toward God for deliverance from enemies, for forgiveness, and for guidance and instruction: “*To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, I put my trust in you ...*” (25:1-2a). Because God is a loving and faithful God, the psalmist has confidence that God’s people can entrust their life to God. The psalm singer lifts the very essence of her being, her *nephesh* (“soul”) to God, asking God not to put her to shame or let her enemies rejoice over her. The opening verse can also be translated “*to you, O LORD, I offer my life,*” which means to trust God amid threatening circumstances (“*And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.*” – Psalm 9:10). As is confessed throughout Scripture, faith and hope are inseparable (“*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” – Hebrews 11:1). Thus, to offer one’s life to God means also to wait for God, to live in hope (“*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope*” – Psalm 130:5). In God is the psalmist’s only hope of not being defeated or destroyed by enemies or circumstances (“*Do not let those who hope in you be put to shame*

because of me, O Lord God of hosts; do not let those who seek you be dishonoured because of me, O God of Israel.” – Psalm 69:6). “*God cannot let down those who hope and wait for God’s intervention, anxiously wringing their hands.*” (Jin H. Han). The offering of the self to God is accompanied by a request that God teach the psalmist God’s way: “*Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.*” (25:4-5). Faith and hope in God are characterized by openness to God’s instruction and God’s faithful leading. The lifestyle of those who trust God will be characterized by humility – openness to God’s teaching and reliance not on the self but on God. Placing one’s trust in the “*God of my salvation*” recognizes that God is not only the source of deliverance from the present dangers in life (“*do not let my enemies exult over me: - 25:2*) but also the well being and prosperity that accompany the observance of the Law:

- “For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” – Deuteronomy 30:9-10.

The psalmist has a good reason to count on God’s mercy and steadfast love, for these are some of the things that one can be sure will last forever: “*Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.*” (25:6). “Mercy” (*raham*) and “steadfast love” (*hesed*) are two of the words that are found in God’s self-revelatory words to Moses in Exodus:

- “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.” – Exodus 34:6-7.

The psalmist’s petition that the Lord “be mindful” enlists a simple Hebrew word that means “remember,” in which the psalmist is not only asking God to recall something that could be forgotten, but that God would act with mercy and steadfast love on behalf of God’s people. This “steadfast love” is God’s covenant love for God’s people, a persistent theme in the biblical text; God continues to love God’s people despite humanity’s persistent disobedience to God:

- “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” – Lamentations 3:22-23.
- “Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” – Joel 2:13.
- “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” – Romans 5:8.

The psalmist confesses her sins before the God of steadfast love in confidence that the Lord will “*not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O LORD!*” (25:7), our assurance that “*if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:8).

- “God’s *hesed*, God’s covenant love for his people, is a pervasive theme in the biblical text, in spite of humanity’s persistent disobedience to God. The ultimate act of *hesed* by God was the coming of Jesus, a dramatic reaching out of God in covenant love to humanity. As a result, [our Lord Jesus Christ] was able to proclaim, ‘the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.’” – Nancy deClaisse-Walford.

The psalmist’s faith that is rooted in the mercy and steadfast love of the Lord is the basis for offering oneself to God who “*leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.*” (25:9). It is a confident faith that trusts that God will lead God’s people in doing “*what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God*” (Micah 6:8). One who places trust in the Lord knows that “*all the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and decrees.*” (25:10).

- “Psalm 25 offers a model of prayer and a model of living that are increasingly difficult to appreciate or even to comprehend in the midst of a culture that promotes self-actualization self-sufficiency, and instant gratification. Instead of living for self, the psalmist prays, and that prayer is an offering of his or her life to God. Instead of depending on self and personal resources, the psalmist depends on God in trust, finding security or refuge in God ... For the psalmist, prayer is not a way to pursue what one wants. Rather, it is a means to seek God’s ways: ‘Thy will be done.’” – J. Clinton McCann, Jr.

The season of Lent is often described as a journey or pilgrimage as we are invited to follow our Lord Jesus Christ on the path that led to Jerusalem, to the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday, to the Garden of Gethsemane and his arrest, to his condemnation and death on the Cross at Golgotha, and to his glorious resurrection on Easter Sunday. Jesus' call to his disciples was an invitation to "follow me," and one who desires to be Christ's disciple must set aside all other paths and guides in order to follow the one who is the *"pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken a seat at the right hand of the throne of God."* (Hebrews 12:2). One who seeks to be a disciple of Jesus must heed his call to obedience: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* (Matthew 16:24). Accepting Jesus' invitation to discipleship means placing all trust and confidence in the one who we recognize as the "good shepherd," the one who leads us in the paths of the Lord that are *"steadfast love and faithfulness,"* the one who *"goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice"* (John 10:4). The call to repentance in this holy season is a call to recognize that following after other guides will lead us in paths that draw us away from the source of mercy and steadfast love to which only our Lord and Saviour can direct us; it is a call to "turn around" and return to the Lord, the God who is *"our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home"* (ELW Hymn 632). Lent is an opportunity for a fresh start, for a new beginning as we now endeavor to follow in the path of *"Christ [who] also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God"* (1 Peter 3:18).

- "Take up your cross, therefore, and follow Jesus, and you will inherit eternal life. Behold, in the cross is everything, and upon your dying on the cross everything depends. There is no other way to life and to true inward peace than the way and discipline of the cross. Go where you will, seek what you want, you will not find a higher way, nor a less exalted but safer way, than the way of the cross. Arrange and order everything to suit your desires and you will still have to bear some kind of suffering, willingly or unwillingly." – Thomas a Kempis.

While my experience on the Appalachian Trail did not make me an avid hiker, it taught me the importance of having a trustworthy and experienced guide to lead me in a path that could quickly turn dangerous if I got lost. My life has been filled with good experiences with trustworthy mentors as well as bad experiences with those who on the surface appeared reliable but proved themselves either inept or corrupt; while I regret those experiences, it has taught me the importance of careful discernment in

who I might place my trust in the future. It has taught me, above all, that the only one worthy of all of our trust and faith is the Lord whose word is trustworthy and true, the God who always fulfills what God has promised, the God who *“alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.”* (Psalm 62:1-2). Because we share the confidence of our ancestors in faith in the trustworthiness of God, we share the sure and certain hope that *“neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:38-39).

- “But those who truly wait upon God ask for grace, and they leave it free to God’s good pleasure how, where, and by what means he shall help them. They do not despair of help, yet they do not give it a name. They rather leave it to God to baptize and name it, however long it may be delayed. But whoever names the help does not receive it, for he does wait and suffer the counsel, will and tarrying of God.” – Martin Luther.

“Lead me, guide me along the way; for if you lead me, I cannot stray. Lord, let me walk each day with thee. Lead me, O Lord, lead me.” – Doris Akers, ELW Hymn 768.

No matter what challenges and uncertainties we may encounter in these difficult seasons of pandemic and isolation, our trust is certain and our faith is sure because it is rooted in the one who leads us in the truth, guides us in paths of righteousness, and assures us that all the paths of our Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who accept the invitation of our Saviour in the Lenten season to follow him in the path that leads to *“forgiveness of sins, life and salvation”* for all who *“have decided to follow Jesus.”*

Amen.