

“Love’s Path”  
Psalm 25:1-10

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and many Christians around the world are encouraged to give up something they love for Lent. Sometimes, we hear people being invited to give up certain kinds of food in order to show their love for God in a sacrificial way. A couple of years ago I heard two ladies telling about what they were going to give up for Lent. The first one told her friend, “You need to give up something that you really like because this is supposed to be a sacrifice. The other lady responded, “I love church so much, so I am giving up going to church for Lent.” It is easy sometimes to forget the real intention behind this time in the Christian calendar as we get caught up in the spiritual fads of our day.

Instead of giving up something for Lent, I would like to invite you to add something that will help you get to the heart of this season which is to go deeper into the heart of God. As we open ourselves to receive more of God’s presence in our lives, I invite you to journey with me through some of the Psalms that are in the Bible. Psalms are often called the prayer book of the Bible. They have been a true gift of encouragement and faith to many generations. One of the most outstanding and highly respected international leaders of the twentieth century was Sweden’s Dag Hammarskjöld. As Secretary-General of the United Nations, he devoted the final years of his life to pursuing the principles espoused in the United Nations Charter—international cooperation and reconciliation toward a peaceful world. Hammarskjöld viewed his work not simply as a political role but as a faith calling. On his travels around the world Hammarskjöld always took three items with him. These items were found in his briefcase that was recovered after the plane crash that took his life in September 1961: a copy of the New Testament, a copy of the Psalms and a copy of the United Nations Charter. Hammarskjöld apparently understood that the book of Psalms presents God’s desire for justice, righteousness, and peace among all peoples and all nations.

The Psalms cover a broad variety of human experiences and help us see how we can bring those experiences in honesty before God. The Psalms were written over many centuries, stretching from the days of Solomon’s temple (about 950 BCE) to after the Exile (about 350 BCE). Psalms are of five types: hymns of praise, laments, thanksgiving psalms, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. Most of the Psalms emerged from Israel’s public worship, especially in the Temple in Jerusalem. They were not first written and then sung: rather, it was the other way around. The collecting of the Psalms was a gradual process that lasted for centuries.

Psalm 25 from which we read this morning is one of nine Psalms that are acrostic—in which each verse begins with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This acrostic form created short, easily memorized prayers anyone could use to seek divine help in times of distress. You can take a look at this Psalm in your bulletin in the Hebrew language and see how on the right side of the margin (which is how Hebrew is written, from right to left), each verse beginning with the letter that is in the parenthesis. This was a device to help people memorize and recite the Psalm. It is also a way to express our human experience of God “from A to Z.”

The Psalm is filled with cries for help and also a deep trust in God’s guidance. God’s response to sin is depicted not simply as destruction, but as creative transformation, as “steadfast love and faithfulness” that reaches out to people in need and provides an alternative way of behaving, along the “paths” of justice. The key to following God’s path of love is being open to the guidance and teachings of God. The religious life, as the Bible describes it, is not one of standing still – it is living along paths that follow God’s way. That is why it is important to pay attention to the language that is used in this Psalm and the Bible about our walk with God. It is a journey. It is never about the destination. Even the early followers of Christ were called followers

of the “way.” Faith (or even life) has never been meant to be static without change. So, how do we open ourselves to God in such a way, when we don’t live in a nomadic culture of movement? How do we let go of our securities so that we are able to truly journey with God?

I think first we must acknowledge our need for guidance and learning. This is what the Psalmist does in Psalm 25. The Psalmist acknowledges his/her need for God’s guidance. But this is so hard for us to do as smart people, as accomplished people, and as a self-reliant kind of people. As children we are open to learning because we know that there is so much that we do not know, but as adults we get to the point where we have enough knowledge that we become self-sufficient and quite comfortable in where we are. So, to even see the need for more guidance is often not first on our agenda in life. But the result of not seeking guidance is often living lives that are disconnected from the deep longing of our souls. Presbyterian writer, Ann Weems puts it beautifully in these words, “There’s something discordant in the words and the living. We say dance, but we crawl. We say peace, but we gather arms. We say Life, but we kill... We say where your heart is there is your treasure also-And if it’s true, our treasures turn out to be: A clean kitchen floor, a skinny figure, a move to the right neighborhood. Our gods are football players, politicians, and rock singers. Our altar is the TV set or a sports car or a neatly manicured lawn. And we sing loud praises, to the newest deodorant, to redoing the kitchen, to anything that makes us look younger.”

The psalmist’s awareness of personal shortcomings (vv. 7, 11), accompanied by humbly seeking God’s direction (vv. 4-5, 8-9, 12), offers an example to every generation of God’s people. This example may be especially timely as the church faces new and controversial issues that call for discernment of the will of God for our place and time. This is also important for us as a country as we look at our economic crisis, as we need humility and openness to new ways. For many of the issues we confront, there are no clear, unambiguous answers. Thus, these questions generate strong differences of opinion. In such circumstances, humility is called for, as is the conviction that God really does continue to teach us God’s ways. In essence, the psalmist’s openness to God’s instruction seems to be an example of what the Reformers called for when they insisted that the Bible must be read under the direction of the Spirit.

It is important in the spiritual life to keep an open mind, open to ideas, experiences, people, the world, and God. Openness means being receptive to new possibilities, without prejudging them. The great Blues musician, John Coltrane, notes that “When there’s something you don’t understand, you have to go humbly to it. You don’t go to school and sit down and say, ‘I know what you’re getting ready to teach me.’ You sit there and you learn. You open your mind. You absorb. But you have to be quiet, you have to be still, to do all this.”

The famous Bill Gates of Microsoft once said that continual openness to learning is essential to him. He said, “Every now and then I like to pick up a copy of Time magazine and read every article from beginning to end, not just the articles that interest me most. That way you can be certain to learn something you didn’t know previously.” Learning is an essential ingredient of any successful business. As soon as you close your mind to the possibility of another reality, you are closing yourself off to other greater opportunities that lie waiting for you. Many outsiders attribute Gates’ success simply to his high level of intelligence. But for Gates, “Smart is an elusive concept.” Instead, he attributes his success to his desire to never stop learning.

Someone wise once said that learning usually passes through three states. In the beginning you learn the right answers. In the second state you learn the right questions. In the third and final stage you learn which questions are worth asking.

In your bulletin today there is an invitation for you to write your own psalm. You don't have to be good at writing in order to do this. This is an invitation to help us find new ways to open ourselves to God during Lent. I hope that you will take this home and try it. This may not work for everyone but if it does work some of you and you would like to share your psalms with us, please let me know. I know that how God speaks to your heart will encourage others on this journey of faith.

Learning takes a lot of openness and a community of support. In her book *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorthoy Bass shares this story about the experience of a group of "middle-aged mothers living in the barrio of East Los Angeles. 'I am very afraid for myself and my children; what are we going to do?' asked Lupe at one of their meetings. All agreed that they shared her fear; in their own front yards, they had seen beatings and shootings, drug sales and muggings. As was their habit, they turned to the Bible for help. The assigned text that evening was the story of Jesus calming the storm. They mused over the disciples' fear, and their own. 'I think that the sea is the barrio at night,' one finally said, 'and the wind is the gang kids with their drugs and their guns. If we had faith, we wouldn't be afraid of walking past them, or to ask them not to disturb us.' But what would faith like this look like in their barrio sea? That night, they formed a Campaign for Peace. They all agreed to sit on their porches at the same time that week; and when that time came, the astonished gang members grew uncomfortable and decided to go somewhere else. With his success behind them, the women next organized a procession through the neighborhood, and then a work party to paint over graffiti, and a community meal for all, including members of the gangs. As a result, there was a thaw in that neighborhood: some gang members helped with the painting, a few began attending Sunday Eucharist, and the rest at least moved away." Imagine this kind of power of transformation through a community that is able to bring their questions before God and one another without predetermined answers. No one would have imagined such a powerful solution.

May this journey of Lent and the prayers of the Psalms guide us on God's path of love as we continue to be the people of God! Amen.