

LIGHT ON THE PATH

Texts: Psalm 119:105-112; John 15:5-8

10/11/09

Introduction

One summer my college roommate asked me to hike a short section of the Appalachian Trail with him. So I said “yes”. Never mind that I had never backpacked anywhere (or that he had been the boy scout of boy scouts)...thirty miles for a young guy in good shape couldn't be hard.

So I borrowed a backpack, wore the work boots from my summer construction site job, and found a sleeping bag that was tucked away in the attic. It was harder than I thought. After a few miles on the trail I had developed blisters that all the moleskin and bandages in the world couldn't cover. Sleeping on the ground was incredibly uncomfortable. And it was amazing how small animals moving outside your tent in the middle of the night sounded large predators in search of a meal.

Life on the trail is harder. And so is experiencing the presence of God in our lives when we hike outside of the familiar church building and into the world.

There is a comfortable spirituality – a practicing of God's presence – that happens when we gather. The choir has chosen music for our inspiration. The preacher has picked a text to proclaim for our edification. The Sunday school teacher has prepared a lesson for our instruction. And the bulletin gives us prayers and responses and guides us in the worship of God.

And then we scatter. Child, teenager, and adult we hike into the world for the better part of six days to love and serve the Lord. We leave the preacher, teacher, choir, and bulletin behind. Do we have a spirituality – a practicing of God's presence – that travels with us? We've been well trained to connect with the God of the temple. Do we know how to connect with the God of the path...where we will spend most of our time?

We're going to need some things if we plan to practice God's presence on the trail. The first is knowing where to look for light when we find ourselves hiking in a dark place.

1. The first thing we need to pull out of our backpack is a bible. Why? The writer of the psalm says it beautifully: Your word is a lamp to my feet and light for my path.

In fact this longest psalm in the bible is about God's "torah" – his divine word/communication to people and what it can do. God's word is not dead print on a page – like the owner's manual of your car hidden under the candy wrappers in your glove compartment. It's the word of a lover to the beloved, uttered so that we might truly live.

Your word...is a light for my path. But what kind of light? This small section of the psalm gives us some clues. God's word is "*righteous law*" in verse 106. It is that which can "*preserve*" my life in verse 107.

God's word leads us to offer *praise* in verse 108. It must *not be forgotten* in verse 109. Using it well means *not straying from its precepts* (obedience) in verse 110.

This light giving word is my *heritage* and my *joy* in verse 111. And my *heart* aspires to keep its decrees in verse 112.

Does that describe your bible? If not we need to learn how to use it a bit better. It is neither as simple nor mechanical as a battery powered flashlight. You could say that the "faith" we bring to it has much to do with the "light" we get out of it.

Do we come to scripture as the beloved listening for the voice of the one who loves us? Or do we greet it with all the affection of a student driver memorizing what to do when we come to a four-way stop? I have yet to meet anyone who picks up the driver's manual any more than absolutely necessary.

When you're hiking down the road you usually can't fit a set of commentaries, a stack of religious books, or the neighborhood preacher in your backpack. But there's room for a bible. And when we know how to use it, that's light enough.

2. Of course, having a light in our backpack is one thing. Believing that we need one is another.

It doesn't take long in this psalm to discover that the writer has found himself on no easy path. *I have suffered much; preserve my life, O Lord, according to your word. (107)*

We don't know why he has suffered. We might be tempted to tell him to pick a better path. Shouldn't the trail of believing life be flat, wide, and easy? Shouldn't it head downhill most of the time? Shouldn't my life be easy? But is that true? And what if committing ourselves to follow God's word in a broken world sometimes makes it harder?

Back in 1978, one year before I graduated from high school, a book was published that lived on the bestseller lists for year. It was titled "The Road Less Traveled" by M. Scott Peck. The book became famous for its first line in the first chapter: *Life is difficult.*

He goes on to say:

Most do not fully see the truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly...about the enormity of their problems...as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. They voice their belief that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be...I have done my share. Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them? Do we want to teach our children to solve them?

What if God is busy is passing out word lamps because God knows we need them? What if hiking faithfully through this life is by nature a challenging, sometimes difficult, often frustrating thing...and the blindest hiker of all is the one who thinks they can see fine all by themselves?

In John's gospel Jesus changes the metaphor for God's word from "light" to a "vine". But listen to what he says: *If a man remains in me, and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.* And how does Jesus remain among his disciples and his disciples remain in him? *His word.*

The light of the word isn't optional equipment for the blindest among us. It isn't a crutch for the weakest among us. It isn't a hobby for the scholarly among us. It is essential equipment for those of who would hope to move down the road of our lives in companionship with Jesus Christ.

We need light. We need it on Sunday, and we need to know how to find it on Monday. We need God's lamp to shine in our sanctuary and in our board rooms, among our friends, and wherever the twisting path of following Jesus takes us.

3. Well, so much for talking about the lamp. Let's talk about how to turn it on. Most importantly, let's talk about turning it on when there's nobody else around to do it for you.

I want to teach you a simple method for finding light in the word. It doesn't require a commentary or a portable preacher. It does require the faith that a gracious God speaks and desires to speak to you.

This is a four step method that has been called "Lectio Divina" – sacred reading - in the history of the church. So grab a lamp – the one you brought with you or the one in the pew – and open it to Psalm 119. We're only going to use a small part of it, verse 105.

To find light in the word the first thing we have to do is "hear" it. I'll read it out loud, but you read it to yourself as if you are alone. And when you read, do with an ear for the voice of a God who loves and wants life for you.

(Read: *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.* "Say them over again to yourself and simply listen. Let them work on you. Perhaps one is speaking to you louder than another." Maintain silence for a few moments.)

Now we need to meditate on this word. We need to "chew" on the word like a tender piece of meat until we get the flavor. And as you chew ask yourself a question: Where is Christ in this word? How does Christ the Word come to us as light on our challenging path?

(Allow a minute for quiet meditation on the word)

The next move is to pray over this word. As you have listened you have heard things. Memories have been stirred up. Needs have been felt, your needs and the needs of others. You've probably sensed some kind of need to respond. Do that with God now. Offer him your emotions, your insights, a change you know you need to make, or a commitment to an action you need to undertake.

(Maintain silence for a few moments.)

And now we need to rest with God. Take a quiet moment just to be in God's presence. The world can wait a minute. We are in relationship with a living God – God is so much more than a divine "to do" list.

Now let me pray for us. *Almighty God, we thank you for your holy word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. May we become ever more closely connected to you as we read your word and seek to follow your light. We confess we sometimes wander from your way. Help us to follow your laws and precepts, not from fear but from passion for you and your way. We pray all this in the name of Jesus, your Word made flesh. Amen.*

Conclusion

In a few minutes you and I will leave this room and take the road less traveled among the people and places of our world. But we don't need to simply hope that the light of this day will be bright enough to light the dark path for the other six.

Take the lamp, open the book, and in the quietness and the chaos of your day seek the light of Christ for the hike.