

“The Right Path”

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

The Appalachian Trail is one of the longest continuously marked hiking trails in the world, measuring approximately 2,180 miles (3,500 km) in length. The Trail goes through fourteen US states along the Appalachian Mountain range from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Katahdin, Maine. It is estimated that 2-3 million people visit the Trail every year, with about 1,000 – 2,000 people attempting to “thru-hike” the entire Trail. Some sections of the trail are relatively easy to hike, while others are very steep and treacherous. It is estimated that the total elevation gain of hiking the entire Appalachian Trail is equivalent to climbing Mt. Everest sixteen times.

A small section of the Appalachian Trail goes through the northwest corner of New Jersey, and it was there that I had my Trail experience during my scouting days. We parked at one of the hundreds of access points at the Delaware Water Gap and joined the many “day-hikers” who only walk a small portion of the Trail. While this section of the Trail wasn’t especially difficult and the scenery spectacular, it did present us with challenges, the greatest being watching for the trail markings to keep us on the right path. While the Trail is well-marked and the paths often very clear, there are places where it is easy to go off the main Trail and get lost in the woods if you do not watch for the markings that have been blazed on trees by those who first created and those who continue to maintain the Trail. Keeping on the Appalachian Trail requires focus, paying attention to the markings that have been placed by others who have gone before us on this path, if a hiker wants to avoid going down a wrong path that might lead to getting lost and even placing one’s life in danger.

Even if you’ve never hiked the Appalachian Trail (or other trails closer to home such as the Avon Trail, which goes through Stratford), we know the importance of following directions and staying on the correct route in order to prevent ourselves from getting lost and finding our way to our desired destination. Every road has numerous signs that tell us which route we are traveling, how far it is to our destination, and when we need to turn onto another road to continue our journey. Maps provide us with detailed information on planning the best route to the place we desire to visit, and following these directions will help us achieve our goal. Modern innovations such as GPS devices and smartphone apps give step-by-step instructions (often spoken) which guide us safely to our desired address and help us avoid getting off-track onto the wrong path or a road that will lead us far away from where we desire to be. Knowing that we are on the right path gives us the assurance that we’re heading in the correct direction to a place we want to visit, or to lead us safely home.

There are other paths that we take in life that have nothing to do with following trail markings, road signs, or the electronic voice of the GPS in our cars. There are goals in our lives that we wish to attain that require us to take the right path if we are to achieve what we desire; it may be a career goal that requires us to follow the right path of education and training, or the goal of financial security that impels us to follow the right path of saving and investing, or the goal of better physical health that requires us to follow the right path of diet and regular exercise. We know how good we feel, the sense of accomplishment that we have when we know we’re on the right path toward these goals; on the other hand, we know that when we get sidetracked, when something causes us to deviate from this path, that we often feel unsettled, unsatisfied, and unhealthy. At times, when we get onto the wrong path, it’s very difficult to find our way back to the place where once again we will be heading in the right direction. When we get into such a dilemma, we need someone to come to our rescue, someone who will find us when we are lost, lead us away from paths that are taking us further from our goals and guiding us back to the right path that will once again lead us to the place we want to be or the goal we want to achieve.

On this first Sunday of Lent, our Lord calls us to come back to the right path that our Saviour has set before us, the path that guides us in our Lord's footsteps to the destination that is the goal of all who have answered Christ's call to be his followers. Lent is a season of repentance and renewal, a time when we are called to *"return to the LORD your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."* (Joel 2:13). To "return to the Lord" is at the heart of the meaning of "repentance" in the Old Testament, which is a call to turn back from following the wrong path that leads us away from God so that our Lord can once again lead us along the right path that leads to life and salvation. It is our acknowledgment that we have gotten so lost that we can't find our way back on our own, and we call out to God to come to our rescue, to be our Saviour from the perilous place in which we find ourselves, and to be the one who will *"teach me your paths, [for] all the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep his covenant and his decrees."*

These words come from Psalm 25, a prayer for help for deliverance from enemies, relief from distress, forgiveness, and guidance and instruction. It is a prayer that serves the purpose of instruction or *catechesis*; it teaches about the character of God, the identity of humanity, and the right relationship between God and people. It is a psalm that expresses the same trust and confidence in God as does Psalm 23, in which we are called to place our faith in the LORD who is our true shepherd and who *"leads me in right paths for his name's sake."* (Psalm 23:3). Because God is loving and faithful, the psalmist entrusts his or her life to God: *"To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O God, in you I trust"* (25:1-2a). The first verse can also be translated *"to you, O LORD, I offer my life."* To offer one's life to God means to trust God amid threatening circumstances, especially in situations in which our lives are endangered by enemies and forces that seek to destroy us: *"... do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous."* (25:2b-3). Putting one's trust in God is an expression of confidence, a confession of one's belief that 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 with hope (*"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the LORD more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning."* – Psalm 130:5-6). In God is the psalmist's only hope of not being defeated or destroyed by enemies or circumstances.

Faith and hope in God are characterized by openness to God's instruction and God's faithful leading. The word "way[s]" (*derek*) occurs four times in the psalm; it connotes a "way of life" or a "lifestyle," following the right path that will offer the abundant life that God desires for all God's people. The lifestyle of those who trust God will be characterized by humility (*"He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way."* – 25:9), which is an openness to God's teaching and reliance not on one's self but solely on God. The result will be justice – "what is right." By way of God's instruction, God justifies sinners.

At the heart of the psalm is the psalmist's call for God to *"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 key phrases that are at the heart of God's character, the manner in which God's fundamental character has been revealed to God's people. They 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 their children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." – Exodus 34:6-7).

The mercy and steadfast love of God are at the heart of the hope that exists even in the midst of the deep despair that is expressed by God's people in the book of Lamentations, where in the midst of their communal mourning that people call to mind the source of hope that remains in the presence of their merciful, loving God:

- “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion, ‘says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’” – Lamentations 3:21-24.

Even though the word of God spoken through the prophet Joel warns of the coming of *“the day of the LORD [that] is great; terrible indeed – who can endure it?”*, even in the face of such dire circumstances there remains hope for God’s people not on the basis of their worthiness or accomplishments, but solely due to the reality of God’s mercy and steadfast love:

- “Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. 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 2:12-13.

It is in the sure and certain knowledge that the God who calls us to return to him is one of mercy and steadfast love that form the basis for the psalmist’s offering of one’s self to God: *“Do 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). The basis of this offering of one’s self is not one’s own worthiness by our need for forgiveness. The psalmist appeals to God’s mercy, requesting that God remember God’s own character, which is mercy and steadfast love. It is both a confession of our sinfulness and a confession of faith in God as the true source of love and mercy, the one who will guide us back from the wrong paths that have led us away from God to lead us along the right paths that will provide us with the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation that bless us when we journey along the paths that God leads us in righteousness for his name’s sake: *“Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation, for you I wait all day long ... All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.”* (25:4, 10).

- “Psalm 25 teaches the church to pray for the Spirit to bring into our lives not only the power and mercy of God but as well as being-taught the way we are to live through the knowledge of God’s ways with us.” – James L. Mays.

As the psalmist calls us to follow the right path that is the way of our God of mercy and steadfast love, so does our Lord Jesus Christ invite us to turn back from following the wrong paths that have led our lives into places far removed from God’s Will for us, to repent and return to the source of life and love. In today’s Gospel lesson, we return to the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel, which has been proclaimed to us on three separate Sundays in the past few months. Mark follows the prediction of the one who is to come, who John the Baptist declares is *“more powerful than I ... I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals”* (1:7) with his account of the baptism of Jesus, where the voice from heaven declares that *“you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* (1:11). Jesus is then driven out into the wilderness, where he was *“tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him”* (1:13), tempted in every way as we are so that he might be the one who will *“lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil,”* who has experienced all that can lead us away from following the Lord’s paths so that he might be the one who will save and redeem us and lead us safely home:

- “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we might receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” – Hebrews 4:15-16.

Once Jesus has been introduced as the unique Son of God, who will embody the Spirit and reverse the course of sinful humanity, his public ministry begins with a statement that declares that *“the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”* (1:15). “The time is fulfilled” indicates that Jesus’ ministry will bring about the age of salvation and fulfill all of the promises that God has spoken through his prophets throughout the ages, including through John the

Baptist; it is the message that *"long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds."* (Hebrews 1:1-2). The announcement of the fulfillment of God's promises and the inauguration of the reign of God in the coming of God's kingdom is followed by an imperative issued to all who would follow Jesus: *"repent, and believe in the good news."* To "repent" (*metanoia*) means to have a change of mind or understanding, a transformation of perspective and direction. In the teaching of Jesus, *metanoia* is an imperative that is implied in the indicative of the message of the kingdom of God. Conversion is a basic requirement that follows from the reality of the kingdom that is being fulfilled in the person of Jesus. His preaching and miracles are a call to conversion in a final and unconditional decision, a once-for-all turning to God in total obedience. Conversion applies to all people, demanding a complete commitment that seeks forgiveness in full trust and surrender. It is not a human achievement; it is God's gift, but as such a binding requirement. The call to repentance is at heart one of joy: *metanoia* is not law, but gospel, for it is a call to turn away from paths that lead us away from God so that we might return to the source of mercy and steadfast love, the right paths that will bring us joy in our journey even as it leads us safely home; for as *"goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of days of our lives,"* following the path that is ours when we repent and return to the Lord will ensure us that when we reach the end of this path, *"we will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."* (Psalm 23:5-6).

- "Turning to the Lord means turning away from all voices calling us to walk some other path. The call of Jesus' first disciples, which follows this section, begins to spell out an important meaning of the way of discipleship: 'Follow me.'" – PHEME PERKINS.

While our troop leaders taught us the importance of following the trail markings on our trek on the Appalachian Trail, we knew that there was no danger of us following the wrong path because we had these trusted guides with us to lead us safely along the right path to our desired destination. As we desire to follow the right path that we lead us through a joy-filled life to the destination our Lord desires for us, we know that we have no better guide than our Lord, who we call upon in this season of Lent to teach us God's paths, to lead us in paths of righteousness, to walk with us every day in every step of our journey. The call of repentance is a call to place our trust in God to *"lead me, guide me along the way; for if you lead me, I cannot stray."* Amen.