

Sometimes the way forward is very clear. Take my call for example, it was very clear to me that being ordained was part of my call to ministry. But think about times when you can barely see the path. Again, my call to ministry. Once I get ordained, I am not so clear on where the path will lead from there. Sometimes we walk on a path that's clearly been used before. It's well curated or at least you can see bent grass from the person who went before you. Other times, we make the path. We put the first footprints in the snow. We make a new path because something happened to the existing path.

I know I have a yearning to see clearly. To know what's ahead. To find my own way through life. Anyone else with me? But the longer we're alive the more we must face the fact that our paths can change, sometimes at a moment's notice. Our paths can get blocked and uncertain. Sometimes the only thing that seems to be consistent is change. Change pushes us to do things we aren't used to. It pushes us to adapt and deal with change.

Lent gives us a chance to pause in the midst of whatever change we might be encountering. It invites us to listen to the music and rhythm of our lives. It's a time for us to reflect on our own journeys. To look back at where we've been and to look ahead to what might be around the bend.

Lent. This defined season. Weeks that began last Wednesday with receiving that smear of ash on our foreheads. Our symbol for the journey we are on right now. Each week we move closer to Holy Week and Easter. For many, this is a familiar path. You've been on it numerous times. If it's your first time experiencing this, I hope you enjoy it to the fullest! This is a season that gives us a chance to connect deeply with our faith. To see our faith as something that nurtures and sustains our being. To see our faith as a witness to our lives as we engage in acts of justice, mercy, and kindness.

Psalm 25 usually makes its lectionary appearance on the first Sunday of Lent. (Psst...that's today) It is attributed to David. Fun fact about the way this Psalm was written. If you were a Hebrew scholar, you would know that this Psalm is written in the form of an acrostic. Each of

its 22 verses begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequential order. I don't know about you, but I nerd out on that kind of stuff.

Psalm 25 is a petition, it is an expression of a need that David brings before God. It's written in a simple form. Verses 1-3 are the beginning. Vs 4-15 are the middle section, the meat of the request. Vs 16-22 make up the conclusion.

There are 5 themes stated in this Psalm. First, David is in a critical situation. He expresses concerns about things that are causing him distress. Primarily, his enemies and his sins. This feels like an especially difficult time for David. Notice how he describes his faith.

In verse 3, David asks God to put his enemies to shame. Vs 5. David asks God to lead him and teach him. Vs 21 David asks to be preserved by the integrity and uprightness of God. These are not passive requests. David is confident that his waiting will not be in vain because God will not abandon him.

Hope is the second theme of this Psalm. The word hesed is chosen here to describe God's steadfast love, God's faithful love. Hesed appears 3 times in this psalm. In verse 6 David speaks of God's mercy and steadfast love. In verse 7 David asks God to forget the sins and transgressions and instead use that steadfast love to remember him in light of God's goodness. In verse 10 David speaks of the paths of the Lord. They are all full of steadfast love and faithfulness.

The third theme is God's faithfulness, which is demonstrated in God's covenant relationship with us. With humanity. In verse 14 David elevates this relationship, referring to God as a friend to those who fear the Most High. God is your friend.

The fourth theme is that of confession. David acknowledges his failure and his desire for God's forgiveness. In verse 7, David speaks of the sins of his youth. In verse 8 David acknowledges

that God teaches sinners the way. In verse 11 David speaks of the great amount of guilt that he wants God to pardon. In verse 18 David makes one more plea for forgiveness.

The final theme is the intricate way that David balances the failures in his life with his faith in God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. We see that in his words from verses 15 & 16. "My eyes are ever toward the Lords, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart and bring me out of my distress.

One of my favorite theologians, Walter Brueggemann had this to say about Psalm 25. "This mismatch between human ambiguity and divine singularity is the hallmark of biblical faith." Waiting for God, hoping in God's steadfast love, God's covenanting presence with humanity in spite of or maybe because of our failures. These are the marks of one who follows in the path of God.

Robert Alter has painstakingly translated the Hebrew Bible. To compare the Hebrew Bible to our own Old Testament, you'd notice some differences. Some verses have different numbers. What we have as a superscription in our Old Testament version of Psalms appears as the first verse of that Psalm.

Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible is a translation we will look at today as we consider verse 4, 8, & 9.

Your ways, O Lord, inform me, Your paths, instruct me. Good and upright is the Lord. Therefore, He guides offenders on the way. He leads the lowly in justice and teaches the lowly His way.

Let's look at these verses from 2 other translations. From the Common English Bible:

Make your ways known to me, Lord; teach me your paths. The Lord is good and does the right thing; he teaches sinners which way they should go. God guides the weak to justice, teaching them his way.

Now from Pamela Greenberg's "The Complete Psalms:

Your roads, God, let me know them. Your pathways, help me recognize them from the rest. You are gentle and straightforward, guiding those who stray on the path, leading the humble to walk in justice, teaching the willing the holy road.

And now a paraphrase from the Message by Eugene Peterson:

Show me how you work, God; School me in your ways. God is fair and just; He corrects the misdirected, Sends them in the right direction. He gives the rejects his hand, and leads them step-by-step.

Let's look at the translations a minute. In the CEB David is asking God to teach him, to make paths known, visible, available to him. But look at how invitational Pamela Greenberg's version is? In her version we see David wrestling with his faith. Almost bewildered by the many choices line the path we call life. David is asking to be able to discern the good paths from the unhealthy ones. To choose paths that lead to acts of justice and kindness. The "holy road".

And let's not forget the paraphrase by Eugene Peterson. "Show me how you work, God; School me in your ways." In the other translations it is David asking for help to see the paths of God. In The Message that responsibility shifts to God. "Show me how you work."

As a child, my mom and grandparents took me to church and Sunday school. I grew up knowing what it meant to be in a faith community. I also remember at bedtime how we would have a devotion or bible story and end our day saying the Lord's prayer. I'm grateful that I had both: a faith community that surrounded and supported me and my family. One that promised to

be a faithful partner in our faith formation. I also had a family who loved me enough to take me to church to learn about this loving God. A God that sounds a lot like the one described in our Psalm today.

Let's ponder a few questions. How has your path of faith been enriched or hindered by the ways you have come to understand the nature of God's relationship with humanity? What are your earliest memories of how God was first described to you? Did you hear people talk about God as an unforgiving critic and judge? Or did you know God as a God of mercy and steadfast love as described in our Psalm today?

To see a way forward may require vision, strength, and imagination. David is honest about the threats in his life and his guilt over the sins he committed. But he also reaffirms his trust in God's presence and his confidence that God will hear him. David longs for a path wider than the narrow one he has followed up to this point. And he has the confidence to know that God will be a refuge for him along the way.

Think about your life of faith and the paths you've taken. Where would you like a do over? Who has been significant in your life of faith. Who has been a role model for you? Who has made the "holy road" visible to you.

Each week we are going to talk about practices that can help you connect with God in a deeper way. On Wednesday we talked about the heart prayer and the breath prayer. I hope you've had a chance to practice one of those at least once since then. There are some verses in Psalm 25 that would make for a great breath prayer.

This week we're going to talk about a very old spiritual practice called walking a labyrinth.

[Show Labyrinth slide]

A practice that we've found evidence of all the way back to the Bronze Age. 3000 BC. A labyrinth is a circle with a pathway winding through it. You start on the outside and walk the path to the circle's center. In the process you will weave through the entire circle. Some turns bring you closer to the center, while some turns take you further away. With patience and faith, you will reach the center. Once you do, it is time to pause, to meditate, to pray, to focus your mind and heart, to find your own center.

While in great need of restoration, our own labyrinth can still lead you on such a journey. There are several throughout Southern Nevada and Arizona. Next time you take a trip, see if you can find one to stop at. You can also find a picture of one and trace it with your finger. If that doesn't appeal to you, perhaps you can just gaze out the window for a moment and take in the movements you see.

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However you spend this time remember to breath. Use your senses to notice what's around you. What do you hear. What do you see. What do you smell. What do you feel? Think about people for whom you are praying. Name them during this time. What about people searching for a path of faith? Name them too. Pray that they will encounter God's steadfast love. I encourage you to take a moment everyday this week to speak Psalm 25:4. "Make your ways known to me, Lord: teach me your paths." I promise this will be a pause that refreshes.