

LEAD US IN THE PATHS - L1B Lenten Sermon by Dan Stern Psalm 25:1-10
March 1, 2009 Broadview Community UCC

This past week I've been thinking a lot about passageways and paths, ways and means, directions and routes, trails, tracks and traversings.

As a lifelong hiker, I've been remembering some of the trails I've hiked upon, and the lay of the land underneath said trails. I've been gathering some of your stories about pathways you've gone down too, and recollecting teachings having to do with being led in certain directions or down particular roads and routes.

This is pretty basic stuff, and vitally important, because however much we may have some very positive end in mind, and I think we're pretty clear about our purpose, our vision, our goals here at Broadview Church, without a consistent, every-day means of orienting ourselves toward that goal, we will, I can pretty much guarantee it, get lost along the way; we'll get distracted or find ourselves getting confused. We have to find the right paths that actually get us, as a faith community, to the places we mean to go, and in a manner in which we mean to get there. To mean well is not enough. Well-meaning people are, as they say, a dime a dozen. More than meaning well, we need adequate means to keep us on task.

I remember the first time I went backpacking with my sister in the North Cascades. It was early summer. We were happily hiking up switchbacks leading southeast from somewhere above Marblemount toward Stehekin. We kept going higher and higher until we realized we were fully above the tree line, walking on snow, and that though the view was absolutely spectacular, we could no longer see the trail beneath our feet – it was completely buried in new snow. Somehow we had to get over the pass in front of us, but we didn't know where the trail led through. My sister and I did our best to orient ourselves toward the end we had in mind, which in our case was Stehekin, and the ferry called the Lady of the Lake that would carry us down Lake Chelan to what there is of civilization on the other side of the Cascades. Orienting ourselves to that goal meant keeping in mind our southeasterly direction and making our way through the lowest lying passable terrain that still took in that same direction. Then on the other side, and this was the harder part, really, we had to somehow – mostly by trial and error in our case – find the trail again below the snowline.

When the path one is walking upon can no longer be seen with the naked eye, some other means of 'seeing' the way has to be employed. This may not seem like a situation we find ourselves in every day, but in a way, it is. If we want to get to godly instead of god-awful places in life, we have to see with the eyes of faith every day of our lives. We have to orient ourselves around God. To focus on the godly goal, knowing that getting there will take not only focus, but also faithfulness and skill.

We don't have to be up on a high mountain pass to practice various daily faithfulness skills. Tom reminded us at our Thursday Bible Study of how often certain sections of Western Washington trails, especially during springtime, get flooded by melting snows. So in glacial bowls or in the more low-lying places, we need to know how to be flexible and adventurous. It may be necessary

to make or to take a trail around the trail, to traipse through on a higher drier makeshift route because the more often used route is temporarily way too muddy.

Maybe this is where poet Robert Frost says it best:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;*

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

The paths we choose to take in life matter. Dorothy Long told our Thursday Bible Study group that she remembers riding on horseback along trails that then traversed vast unfenced hilly parts of S. Texas. Once, however, her horse was in a hurry, and decided to go straight up a rather steep incline. Dorothy's saddle wasn't positioned tightly enough underneath her so she fell off. Horses know what direction they usually go, both in their going out and in their coming back home. But they also are known to take short cuts when they feel like it, whether good for the rider, or for the eroding land underneath their hoofs, or not.

Through the sagebrush that clings to N. Central Washington hillsides, there are deer paths everywhere; we sometimes used to call them cow trails. People can follow them too. They're naturally ecologically appropriate, because rather than making their way straight up a steep hillside, as horses or riders in a hurry sometimes do, these paths spiral longitudinally around steep hillsides. A deep path or cow trail serves its purpose best by allowing said deer or cow to take its time, to leisurely find food along the pathway. I get this visual picture here of what one of my heroes, American peacemaker, A.J. Mustie used to say. He said, "There is no way to peace; peace is the way." "All the way to heaven is heaven", another once quipped. In other words, the means has to be consistent with the end. If our goal is peace with God, our way has to be peaceful and godly.

Making our way in life means; we have to orient ourselves in the right direction; we have to keep our eyes on the prize. But we also need to respect the process of getting there, to love the way itself, not only the end. Maybe the cows and deer on their roundabout little trails are onto something. Cow trails may eventually get us somewhere, meandering in spirals slowly toward the top or to the bottom of the hillside, but they're not well-suited for either the horse or human who's in a hurry.

It's important to find a path that serves its purpose well. At some points along life's way, we'll need to relax, take our time; at other points, we'll need a much more focused sense of urgency. We may need to take the lowest ground or the highest ground, the quickest route, or the longest way around. It all depends. We encounter different terrain, different weather conditions along life's way. We have to be flexible. We also have to stay focused.

Fortunately, what our responsive opening prayer affirmed this morning is true: Though the distance is far, the journey uncertain, the story incomplete, we can retrace the footprints of those who have gone the way before. When it's dark, we can trust that there is yet light out in front of us. And we can know, by faith, what is our destination.

When it comes to retracing footprints, the psalms are a great place to start. For many centuries, among people of all faiths, the psalms have been a source of comfort and encouragement. Today's, for instance, was originally an acrostic song-poem, which means that each verse began with one of the 22 different letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It was, in other words, the psalmist's experience of God all along life's way, literally from A to Z. The metaphor of going on a path is central to this psalm – "Teach me your ways, O God. Lead me in your paths." The path or way concept is central through the entire bible. Early Christians were called the people of The Way. As the Bible describes it, clearly the religious life is not one of standing still. A life of faith is about going down paths, paths which get easier to follow the more they get used.

Over time, the experience of various saints and sojourners began to coalesce into patterns, practices, disciplines, orders others could look to and imitate. The Episcopal author and theologian Matthew Fox is best known for having made newly accessible four ancient medieval Christian vias, or ways; spiritual paths that saints and sojourners have tread upon for centuries. The *via positiva* is the way that befriends creation. This is the deer trail, the cow path that meanders slowly along in the sunshine and wildflowers, enjoying the beauty of creation as it is, and doesn't try to change a thing. This is the way of God incarnate, already realized in God's created goodness. I think of this as a Christmas kind of energy, born and growing among us. The *via negativa* is the way that befriends darkness. It is the murkier, muddier, low-lying trail that we somehow have to get through or around. This path accepts, examines things that sometimes get in the way, such as pain, emptiness, and sadness. For followers of the Way of Christ, it is seasonally appropriate just now, because it is the Lenten path, the wilderness way, the way of the cross. To go on this path takes the most courage because on it, we look squarely at what is real, even when what is real is a very difficult thing about our won selves. But it's also a path that we need to go on, because – no pain, no gain – it makes us strong; we exercise our spiritual muscle the most along this path, knowing by faith what is beyond it, and keeping our eyes ever on that prize. We'll give more detailed attention to this portion of life's pathway in the immediately upcoming Sundays of Lent. The *via creativa* is the way that befriends our own ability to share with God is divine creativity. It "engages the creative flow of art, music, conversation, and writing." It is Easter energy, it is resurrection newness, and it only comes in to us in its fullest glory after we've gone down the more-challenging Lenten paths of life. And finally, the *via transformativa*, which is about a God and a people of God making peace and justice in the world, making liberation and love through the never-ceasing movement of the Holy Spirit. This is God is still speaking Pentecost energy.

I wanted to take the time to describe these four ways of the ancient Christian mystics and saints in part just to say how I've come to appreciate the hard-won collective wisdom of the Christian calendar's well-established seasons and rhythms. All of our seasons of Spirit: Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Christmas – have a long-established, hard-won wisdom and consistency about them. Our faith forebears were onto something. We have guides to help us walk down these paths. Some are living guides right here among us at Broadview Church. We are, after all, a people of

faith who practice a variety of faith disciplines and prayer patterns every day of our lives. We can learn a lot from one another. Personally I can say that I know I'm still learning a great deal from you; I find it amazing the wealth of wisdom, the layers of both practical and spiritual experience that are contained in this place. I hope this year, especially during Lent, that we'll be quite intentional in sharing with each other specific details about the faith practices we personally engage in.

The paths our ancestors walked upon were not easy ways to go. Yet, they were happy to go on them because they knew where those paths were leading them.

I have good reason to believe that most of us, if our own hearts are at all in sync with the heart of God as it has beat in this faith community for lo, these eight some decades now, have no fear with regard to our ultimate destination. If we believe in a loving God, we know by faith that we'll get somehow to that love. But meanwhile, we live in the mean time, and the mean time can be mean! So to get by, we have to orient ourselves to that loving end, ever utilizing ways and means consistent with our getting there.

Jesus is himself credited in the Gospel of John with having said, "I am the way." Those four little words contain a wealth of mystery, a cosmic kind of truth. The poet W.H. Auden elaborated on that cosmic mystery, when he rephrased it poetically: "He is the Way. Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness; You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures."

During the season of Lent that is before us, let us enter the wilderness way of unlikeness and adventure together. Amen.