

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Teach Me Your Paths”

Rev. David K. Groth

September 25, 2011

“Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths (Psalm 25:4).

The home in which I grew up is set back from the highway a good bit. The driveway passes between two corn fields, then a marshy area, and then it goes up a hill cutting through a wooded area. I love walking that driveway. There’s always something new going on. This time of year, the goldenrod is past prime, but the sumac is starting to turn a gorgeous shade of cranberry. And an old friend is reappearing. It’s a path, actually, a wildlife path that meanders through the wetlands and crosses the driveway and goes off into the neighbor’s woods. In the summer, when things are growing so vigorously, the path disappears for a time; but now, it’s reemerging. It’s narrow and muddy through the marsh. Based on the prints, it’s mostly deer that use it. There had been a derelict barbed wire fence running parallel to the driveway and often tufts of hair are on the barbs. A few years ago I took the wire cutters down and made the path a little easier for them. The path has been there for decades, always crossing the driveway at the same spot. Generations of deer have used it as they forage for food. It’s intriguing: just like you and me, deer are creatures of habit, of routine.

What well worn paths are in your life? What routines, what habits of the heart? Some of those paths are good and right. They are God pleasing. I’m thinking of the work you do to support your family, the careful parenting of your children and grandchildren, the care you provide for elderly neighbors and relatives. I’m thinking of your service in the community. And you followed a path to God’s house today. For some of you it’s a well worn path. For others, that path is at risk of disappearing altogether for lack of use. In any event, some of our paths, our routines, our habits of the heart are good; some not so good, not right, not God pleasing. Some well worn paths of ours *should* be abandoned or remain abandoned. My guess is you know which ones I’m talking about. And so with David we pray, “Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.” Though once a shepherd, David is asking for the Lord to shepherd him. Though king, David is asking for the King of kings to lead him. “Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.”

Sometimes, when the Bible speaks of the paths of the Lord, it is speaking of his commands. Psalm 119:15, “I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your paths.” These commands are not written to smother the joy and excitement out of life. They are written to protect us and increase our joy, our peace. To ignore God’s commands all but guarantees a lonely, tumultuous life. In Isaiah, the Lord promises, “I am the LORD your God, who leads you in the path you should go. Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would flow like a river . . .” (48:17).

Often, the Bible says people neither observe nor even *know* the ways of the Lord. Mostly they follow their own ways. Proverbs 2 says men “forsake the paths of righteousness to

walk in the ways of darkness; they rejoice in doing evil . . . men whose paths are crooked and whose ways are devious” (13ff.). Often, we don’t even know when we’ve left the ways of the Lord. “How can it be wrong when it feels right?” we say. Proverbs 12 says, “The way of a fool is [always] right in his own eyes” (v.15).

What foolish habits of the heart do you nurture? What well worn paths are there in your life that you need to abandon? Joel 2:13, “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

Shortly before his death King David spoke to his son Solomon who would, of course, become King upon David’s death. David gave him some parting advice, but it wasn’t about how to govern Israel, nor was it about upholding the family legacy. Instead he said “I am about to go the way of all the earth. So be strong and show yourself a man . . . and walk in the *Lord’s* ways, keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his testimonies” (1 Kings 2:2ff).

In Matthew 7 Jesus says, “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (vv. 13-14). The contrast is stark and clear. Two routes lead in opposite directions, one to heaven and one to hell. The way to destruction, Jesus said, is broad and easy and crowded. I picture those pedestrian lanes coming out of Miller Park at the end of a game. No bumps. Nothing to trip on. No dark stairwells, but rather effortless ramps and easy escalators. C.S. Lewis wrote, “The safest road to Hell is the gradual one--the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts” (Screwtape Letters).

So this is a call to discipleship. The narrow way to life is not just that of piety in contrast to vice. No, the demands of Jesus are much more severe. This path is difficult. This life of Christian discipleship can be a thorny, messy business. In many areas Christian discipleship is rewarded with fierce persecution. But even where there is freedom to worship him, there are few on this path. It’s not because it’s too small, but because people still prefer the easier way.

I remember when hiking at Yellowstone, a ranger was talking about how wild animals usually want to avoid humans because we might eat them. Therefore to avoid us, they avoid our trails in the wilderness. With grizzly bears, it’s a little different. They’re not so worried about us eating them, and so they don’t necessarily avoid our hiking trails. In fact, they often prefer them. They don’t like their eyes being poked by branches any more than you and me. They don’t want their fur all tangled up with burrs any more than you want them in your shoe laces and on your socks. Grizzlies are like us and we are like them: we prefer the paths of least resistance. We prefer the ways that are wide and easy.

But Jesus said “narrow and difficult is the way that leads to life.” It’s a way that is usually counter cultural. It’s a way that can even be counter-intuitive. In Isaiah 55 the Lord reminds us, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, *neither are your ways my ways*, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” So we pray with David, “*Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.*”

How does he do that? How does the Lord make his ways and paths known to us? He never promises your gut instinct will be infallible. Your gut instinct is manipulated by your stomach, and by other passions. He never promises the matriarch or patriarch of the family will

have it all right by virtue of their age and experience. We honor them, and they do have things to teach us, but we also know they are fallen and fallible. The Lord makes no promises to show us his way, other than through his Word. “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and light for my path” (Ps. 119:105). His Word will illuminate the Lord’s path for us. 2 Timothy 3 says, “From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” If you want to know the Lord’s wisdom then search the scriptures. “But they were written so long ago” you might object, “and are irrelevant to 2011.” Not long ago in a counseling session, when the fellow didn’t like what I was pointing out from God’s Word, he responded by saying, “You do realize this was written when people still lived in tents.” With one breath from a young man in his 20’s, God’s timeless wisdom was swept away like dust off the garage floor.

In terms of finding our way in life, I suspect we all underestimate God’s wisdom of old and overestimate man’s clever devices. Last year, for my birthday I was given a GPS, (a Garmin) to help me find the right paths. It’s very helpful. It has probably paid for itself in gasoline saved, and has largely replaced the maps in my glove compartment. But you cannot blindly trust those things, can you? The directions they give are not always reliable. Transportation officials are saying they are posing safety problems. An article in the Wall Street Journal was devoted to the issue: (March 18, 2008). A fellow by the name of Norman Sussman, outside of Sante Fe, nearly drove off a cliff. He was just following his GPS. He veered up a winding mountain road, expecting to rejoin the interstate. After a half-hour of hairpin turns the road ended at a guardrail and a 200 foot drop. Truck drivers are sent into small, residential streets with narrow roads and low branches. A fellow by the name of Harvey Gerst in Texas has named the disembodied voice of his GPS “Christine”. Once Christine directed him right into oncoming traffic. “She’s trying to kill me” Harvey said. Humans have always shown a surprising willingness to put our trust our technology. We buy a GPS and we assume it’s all-knowing, but it’s not. My own GPS cannot even get me all the way home. I don’t know why; maybe the twelve year old streets by the hospital have not yet been mapped. Whenever I get close to home the digital map starts spinning in disorientation. The voice tries to get me to turn around and go the other way. “Recalculating.” “Recalculating.”

If you want to get Home home, the home with a capital “h”, you’re going to need something more than GPS. You’re going to need a wisdom that is much older. You’re going to need the timeless wisdom of God to show you the way. And that’s only found in his Word.

David prayed, “Make me know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.” A thousand years later, one from David’s own lineage would say, “I am the Way” “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6). “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Christ is your path to the forgiveness you need. Christ is your path to the everlasting life you want. Christ is your path to freedom and peace. No one else has redeemed you from sin, death and the devil. He alone is the Way. He is the sole and sufficient means to salvation. He has done it all, and gives it all freely, graciously, generously.

“Make me to know Your ways, O Lord.” “I am the way” said Jesus.

I close with a prayer from Patrick of Ireland. He was born on March 17, 387. He grew up in present day England which at the time was a remote province of the Roman Empire. At 16 years of age, Patrick was captured by Irish raiders and taken as a slave to Ireland. His Christian faith grew there in captivity. After 6 years, he escaped back to his home in Britain. Years later, he felt God was calling him to return to Ireland, now as a missionary. He traveled back to the land that had enslaved him and began preaching and teaching. He took a lot of risks, was often threatened, yet with time, he was able to baptize thousands. He is, of course, the patron saint of Ireland. He wrote a prayer, a famous prayer about Christ the Way.

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger. . .*

*Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord (Patrick of Ireland, 461 AD). Amen.*