

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

March 1, 2009  
*First Sunday in Lent*  
Mark 1:9-15 & Psalm 25:1-10

### God's Loving Paths

This past Wednesday marked the beginning of the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday as it is called is the day that is 40 days before Easter. For you quick witted math whizzes, the 40 days do not include the six Sundays between now and Easter. That's because Lent is the one time of the year when we as Easter people—another name for Christians—try to reflect on and ponder what life would be for us without the empty cross of Easter. Because, in the words of Richard Avery, of Avery & Marsh fame, “Every Sunday is Easter Sunday from now on,” we acknowledge that it is impossible for those of us redeemed by the resurrection of Jesus to pretend otherwise. Nevertheless there is value in reflecting on how it was before Jesus' death and resurrection. For the reality today for a huge portion of the people we know who are around and among us is that they are living *before* Jesus' death and resurrection because they have never heard of it. They know little or nothing of this most important part of Jesus' life and ministry. When we think back to what pre-Easter means, we are more able to understand those who have yet to get there.

One of the ways we do that is to enter into the biblical narrative of the life of Jesus during the journey he took on the way to Jerusalem where he would be accused, tried, convicted and sentenced to die. The story begins today with his baptism and then his temptation while in the wilderness for 40 days, before he begins his public ministry in Galilee.

As we enter into this journey, following in the footsteps of Jesus, we do so with reference to a special part of the Hebrew scriptures—that is the Book of Psalms. In fact for each of the next four Sundays we're going to be looking at one of the psalms as guideposts along this Lenten journey.

As Jesus entered the wilderness for his 40-day period of fasting and preparation, surely one of the sources of strength to him was his knowledge and understanding of the Jewish scriptures. For Jesus was a devout Jew who had been raised in that faith and immersed in it through his whole life. Jesus had an intimate knowledge of the psalms and surely had integrated their truths into his life.

Psalm 25 has a feature to it that is lost to a casual reader of the psalms who is reading them in any language other than the original Hebrew. It is an acrostic, in which each one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet begins each of the 22 verses of this psalm. This was a clever way to make the point that God is engaged in all of life, in every respect. In English we'd say God's participation in the life of the world covers it all—from A to Z, from start to finish, from beginning to end. So this psalm in particular is especially well-suited for those beginning this journey, for it assures us that God is leading the way.

Up until this year, the invitation to join a journey through the wilderness has been an exercise in creative imagination—for the last 20 years or so anyway. For a large majority of people, it took some doing to put yourself in a place of vulnerability where turning to God was the only source of strength and support. It has been awhile since that has felt to be true for some folks anyway. When the economy was strong and getting stronger; when the markets kept producing more than ample returns; when credit was easy to come by; it

was hard to not get swept up in the allure of the promises from these sectors that life was only going to get better and better as time goes on.

Then last fall the lustrous sheen that has glimmered so brightly as to obscure the more enduring foundation that is our faith, began to shine less brightly. And then in a cascading series of events over the last few months the economic slowdown became a recession and has now been deemed by some as a full-blown depression. It seems that each day brings the news of yet another bank or company on the verge of collapse and failure. With the closing of some businesses and the shrinking of many others, tens of thousands of workers are being laid off or let go completely, swelling the ranks of the unemployed to levels not seen since the Great Depression.

In all of these events we are witnessing the collapse of that which had been trusted to support and sustain millions of people in this country, and indeed around the world. For the first time in a quarter century, the moorings that have been tied to national economic strength and vitality have come undone, leaving millions in this country and around the world flailing about in this dark storm.

This time of crisis is becoming an opportunity for the news of God's love to be shared more widely than ever before. Because although we have been hanging in there with our ongoing attempts to get God's word out there amidst all of the other voices shouting for attention, we may find that in these contemporary times, there are a lot fewer competing voices and messages out there.

And just what is that message?

As Jesus faced temptation in the wilderness, and as we face the temptation to despair, the message of God's leading the way that is so eloquently proclaimed in this psalm, shines through the darkness as a beacon of hope. It's a beacon to which we can fix our focus and it's a beacon that can help us set a course through the darkness and uncertainty toward the promised bright future that is God's. It's the beacon of hope that sustained Jesus along the path of his ministry. It is the beacon of hope that continues to provide us the guidance we need to get through today, tomorrow, and each and every day that lies before us.

This Lenten journey is the opportune time for us to reexamine our level of involvement. Are we along for the ride, because that's what one does each year at this time? Are we going through the motions? Or can we, with the guidance and encouragement of God, enter into this journey this year with a renewed sense of openness to discover new things about God as well as new things about ourselves.

It's very appropriate to begin our Lenten journey around this table of holy communion. After today, in this congregation, the next time we will gather at this table will be on Maundy Thursday on April 9. That day is in Holy Week, when we will be commemorating Jesus's last week before he died on the cross. The mood and context will be quite different on that evening. But today we are at the beginning of this journey. And like anyone going on a long trip there is the anticipation of learning new things, seeing new sights and expanding one's perspective. There are also "butterflies" at the beginning of journeys like this because of those surprises and bumps along the way that will surely be upsetting and unsettling to us.

But unlike the jolts and quakes that have rocked us recently in our economic and financial arenas where we might be wondering if the whole roof will cave in on us, the unexpected and unanticipated aspects of our journey with God are quite different. And that is because it is God's journey along God's loving paths.

In the words of the psalmist once again. "Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees." (Ps. 25:8-10)

Let us pray. Teach us your paths, O God and lead us in your truth. You have been steadfast in your love for us, and merciful in welcoming and sustaining us. Forgive us when we move away from your loving paths, and strengthen us to follow in your way. Amen. (Seasons of the Spirit curriculum worship resources for Lent 1, Year B)