

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

4th Sunday after Epiphany
Year A

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Text: Deuteronomy 30: /Psalm 119

Title: “Fresh Start: Overcoming SAD—Spiritual Affective Disorder. Walk with God”

I really enjoy hiking. I don't do it often enough. Too many other things seem to occupy my time. Still, there's just something about being in the vastness of God's creation that tends to the soul—at least to my soul. Something about feeling the wind—God's breath—on the cheeks, feeling the shade of a tall white pine on a hot day, shrinking before the grand cliff of Hallet's Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park. I can understand how the Native American's came to understand the earth as sacred, why they found particular wild places like the Black Hills as holy places.

Early in our marriage, I wanted to experience some backpacking with Lynn. I just knew that once she got out there in the wilderness, she would feel the same way I did. So we planned a 4-day trip to the National Lakeshore Park in the UP. We'd start in Munising and hike a couple of days in the park, camping along the shore of Lake Superior. I couldn't wait! We packed our gear and drove up after work on a Friday night. Our timeline was tight. We needed to get to the DNR office to get a camping permit and get on the trail and hike to the first campground—Potato Patch Campground—and get our tent set up preferably before dark. So we were in a bit of a rush.

After receiving our permit, we drove to the trailhead, parked the car, quickly put on our packs and started down what I thought was the right trail. It took us to the edge of the lake, high above Lake Superior, the trail was quite narrow but we made our way walking along the edge of the cliffs, weaving around trees and rocks as the trail guided us. Something didn't seem quite right though. The trail became less obvious and when we came to a tree fallen across the path, I began to question whether or not we were on the right one. We both managed to get around the fallen tree but we hadn't gone much further when the trail completely disappeared. A huge chunk of the cliff had broken off and fallen into Lake Superior and taken the trail with it. Okay, now I knew we were on the wrong trail.

Because Lynn's pack wasn't adjusted very well, she was already hurting, so she decided to sit and rest as I made my way up the hill away from the lake to see if I could find the right trail. It was a bit of a climb as the sun was going down, but when I reached the top and walked about 20 yards, there was a nice, level, clear, three foot “road” cutting through the woods. I called down to Lynn and she made her way up.

We both stood on the path now wondering which way to go, feeling rushed because the

sun was now below the horizon. There were no signs so we didn't know which way our campground was exactly, so we opted to hike back toward the car. We walked, Lynn's back still hurting from the maladjusted pack. We found our campground after dark and discovered it was only about 100 yards from our car. By that time she was hurting so much we decided to drive into town and find a hotel.

Walking through life with people you love often means experiencing obstacles. It's not always what we expect, not always what we imagine or hope for. And sometimes it's more than we could hope for or imagine. It's the journey, though, that matters. It's walking with people you care about that matters.

The Hebrew writers thought this way about God and used the metaphor of walking with God or walking in God's ways to describe what it means to be a person of faith. We heard a few moments ago from Moses' farewell speech telling the people getting ready to finally cross over into the promise land to love the Lord your God and walk in his ways and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. Moses tells them to continue to walk with God as they had been doing for the last 40 years. Now listen to a small portion of Psalm 119.

- ¹ Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD.
- ² Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
- ³ who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.
- ⁴ You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
- ⁵ O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!
- ⁶ Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
- ⁷ I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.
- ⁸ I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.
- ⁹ How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.

This Psalm is the longest psalm in the Bible: 176 verses. It is what is called an "acrostic" which means that the poet has written it using all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and composed it beginning with the first section with each line using the first letter of the

Hebrew alphabet—"aleph"; the second section with each line beginning with the second letter—"beth" and each succeeding section using the remaining letters all the way to the last letter—"taw". That means there are 22 sections, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. And each section contains 8 verses and there are 8 frequently used terms throughout. The first and most frequently used term is "torah" which is translated as "teaching" or "instruction" or "law". The other seven terms are synonyms of "torah": terms like "decrees" or "statutes" or "precepts" or "commands" or "commandments" or "ordinances". One scholar has written that "If a person succeeds in reading this psalm's 176 verses one after the other at one sitting, the effect is overwhelming." (NIB, p. 1166, v. IV) Another writes "This is precisely the effect the psalmist intended! For the psalmist, the importance of God's instruction is overwhelming. It applies to everything at every moment, and apart from it, there is nothing worthy to be called life. ...the proper stance toward God is constant openness to God's instruction." (ibid.)

"...constant openness to God's instruction".

To walk with God--to walk in God's ways--is to be open constantly to God's instruction, God's leading, God's guidance.

It is more than coincidence that Jesus when he was recruiting people said "Follow me! Follow me! Walk with me. Take this journey with me. Walk this way with me for I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. Follow me! Follow me!" Jesus was inviting his disciples to a "...constant openness to God's instruction" which applies to all of life from "A" to "Z".

² Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
³ who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.

"Follow me! Follow me!" It was an invitation to seek him with their whole heart and walk in his ways. It was an invitation to life.

Wednesday night, Thursday & Friday, I was in Dewitt participating in training for mentors of ministerial candidates and then co-mentoring a group of current candidates. It's a new model for the UMC to assist people in discerning how God may be calling them to service in the church. It has to do with walking with God as people listen for God's leading, as they open themselves to God's instruction.

Over the course of those few days, we heard from several people who shared how they experienced God's call and claim on their lives. And, of course, the reminder was repeated that all of us are called by God in one way or another. In the UMC we are all ministers not just the person standing in the pulpit, but everyone is a minister and that means you. God wants you, too.

As I listened, I was rehearsing my own faith journey. It started in the womb. My mother attended the Methodist church before I was born. Not far from here: at the time it was Kochville Methodist Church because we had not yet become United Methodist. That didn't happen until 1968. She attended that church and when I was born I was baptized promptly. Dad wasn't much of a church person, but our mother made sure my brother, sister and I were in church almost

every single Sunday. It was just what we did. So I learned the stories of faith because we were there nearly every week. I learned the story of Moses and the Exodus. I learned the 10 commandments. Had to memorize them for Sunday school. Went to vacation Bible school and enjoyed the games, the crafts and of course more faith stories. As a child, church was the place I belonged and it was the people who embodied the love of Christ for me. There was joy there as a child and I could just feel it in the people. Christ was real because the people created a safe place of belonging for me and all the other children.

Confirmation came. There was study involved and something began to stir in me, and at one particular Lenten service I reconfirmed what was begun at my baptism and gave my life to Christ. I had this yearning for God that I could not fully explain, a desire for the holy I could not really express adequately. I didn't have the words and didn't have a clear sense of what it all meant but because of that little church, I knew—I knew—God was real. Christ was loving, and I wanted to follow him.

Youth group offered more opportunities for fellowship. There were retreats and fundraisers and dances and Bible study. We made rolls once and gave the money to the retirement homes of Chelsea and Boulevard Temple when they were asking churches to help them provide adequate care for the elderly. We took a trip to Montreal with our pastor and the boys were disciplined for shooting off fireworks near our camp. All of it fed the growing desire I had to follow Christ and walk in his ways.

There was, like many people experience, a distancing from the church during high school, but our pastor at the time somehow touched my heart through his preaching. Every week it seemed I heard something about God's grace in Jesus, God's unbounded love for all people—including me, Christ's desire that we be in relationship with him—a real relationship. I so needed to hear that because I didn't always have a sense that I was headed in the right direction. I didn't always feel as if I was walking in his ways. But Dalton preached in ways that touched my heart. He wasn't a loud, expressive preacher, but quiet and reserved. Yet the words I heard and the Spirit through them somehow met that yearning for God that I'd always had in my heart.

In college I started in a pre-pharmacy curriculum. Lots of sciences and math. Although I did well academically, I just wasn't feeling fulfilled. It wasn't an academic question. It was a heart question. I decided maybe pharmacy wasn't the place for me and switched to mechanical engineering technology, but still I did not find the fulfillment I was seeking.

After I'd met Lynn at the church one Hanging of the Greens Sunday and we had begun a relationship, I was sharing my dissatisfactions with her and wondering aloud what to do. We were driving down the road as we were talking and she responded, "Have you ever thought about the ministry?" Little did she know that the idea of becoming a pastor had been planted in my heart as a young teenager during those confirmation days. The thought would rise in my mind, and I would squelch it as fast as it came. I wanted nothing to do with it. I just didn't want to do it and didn't know if I could. And so whenever the thought would come, I would bury it quickly.

But God is a relentless pursuer and a patient one too, so when my new girlfriend asked that question out of the blue, it completely caught me by surprise, and that yearning I had for God kicked into high gear. And the rest, as they say, is history.

The thing is that when we decide to follow Christ, when we decide to walk in the ways of God, and make an effort to remain in "constant openness to God's instruction", God will no doubt surprise you. I never expected to be a pastor, never expected to serve the churches I served, never expected to go around the country as a youth pastor on mission trips, never

expected to go to Mexico and build houses for those living in poverty, never expected to go to Israel and walk in the footsteps of Jesus or to Greece and travel the journeys of Paul. Never expected to meet my beautiful wife in church. So many things I never expected, but when we open our lives to God's leading, when we seek to remain constantly open to God's instructions, when we decide to follow Christ, there will be surprises.

God will surprise you and lead you in ways you never anticipated. Ask Tamara Klida if she expected One Week One Street to happen and be as impactful as it has been in the city of Saginaw. God is faithful and leads in ways that bring life and love to us and to the world around us.

This morning I'm meeting with some folks to talk about how the church might help those who struggle with drugs after another person in the community died. I don't know where it might lead but I believe that God's Spirit moves whenever and wherever there is pain and brokenness in the world, and God calls all of us to be open to the ways in which God might use us to be agents of healing. God calls us to walk with him, to walk in his ways, to remain constantly open.

In all of this, your spiritual homework this week is literally to exercise. The invitation is to take a literal walk with God. Take a walk and listen for God's leading. Not only is the exercise good for us physically, but walking can also be good for us spiritually as we reflect on what it means for us personally to walk with the Lord. There are some instructions there on the insert that may be helpful as you listen for where God may be calling you to go with God.

One of those places God might be calling you to walk may have to do with our mission moment. Becky Jenkins is the leader of this invitation for you to take a walk with God to the Midwest Mission Distribution Center.