

Palisades Presbyterian Church

Twentieth-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 24, 2006

Reflection:

"Nations, like stars, are entitled to eclipse. All is well, provided the light returns and the eclipse does not become endless night. Dawn and resurrection are synonymous. The reappearance of the light is the same as the survival of the soul." - Victor Hugo

Readings: Proverbs 1: 1 – 6

Mark 9: 30 – 37

Hymns: Hymn #464 Joyful! Joyful!
 Hymn # 13 Prepare the Way
 Hymn #522 Lord When I Came Into This Life

On the Path
© 2006 Ray Bagnuolo

There is a program out of the State Education Department in Colorado called PATHS, an acronym for: "Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies" – PATHS. The literature describes it as a "comprehensive program for promoting emotional and social competencies and reducing aggression and behavior problems in elementary school-aged children, while simultaneously enhancing the educational process in the classroom.

These are some of the goals of the program:

- Improved self-control,
- Improved understanding and recognition of emotions,
- Increased ability to tolerate frustration,
- Use of more effective conflict-resolution strategies,
- Improved thinking and planning skills,
- Decreased anxiety/depressive symptoms
- Decreased conduct problems
- Decreased symptoms of sadness and depression and
- Decreased report of conduct problems, including aggression

As I prepared my remarks for this morning and came across this program, I thought about how the PATHS, the ways we choose and the directions we take do, indeed, even for us adults or would be adults -- require these skills:

Self-control, improved understanding of emotions, ability to tolerate frustration, effective conflict-resolution strategies and so forth...

For kids who have difficulties dealing with such things, it's going to be especially hard, because these are not simply elements of a developmental passage, as we know. Simply, there is no navigation without navigational skills. Even when drifting, the most basic of sailors know the tides and currents.

Spiritually, it seems the same to me, with one exception – that is that – although I don't always understand it – I feel as though I am always being guided. Even so, maybe like you, I can still find myself adrift from time to time. No clear paths, tides, winds, or even stars to follow. If that sense of "lost" continues long enough, I find myself in "the desert," an allegorical place in which I know two things:

one: I can breathe a bit more easily, knowing where I am: back in the desert where I will slow down, chill out, try to wear life like a loose garment, and slowly resettle into a dimension of increased trust and acceptance in God and God's will. (That can take a while for me!)

two: I know this will pass. I've been here before and will eventually find myself restored to my old self, transformed in some way, enough, to continue on the journey to ... wherever.

The path – even to the desert - seems to have its own built in ways of helping us to find what we need to through. Sometime that is alone, most of the time with others.

All of this started to come to mind when I paused to think about today's first reading. I can tell you that I am not one who generally speaks in terms of wicked or evil, punishment of sin as a weapon, or the perishing of one group over the other. I just don't think like that – or was made to think like that.

Instead, I find inside of me a construct that is closer to the concept of "illness" as an explanation for some of the acts and behaviors of people that are hard to understand, and sometimes quite heinous. That's just me. Others look at these things differently.

All that is to say that when I got to the last line of this morning's reading of the psalm that (like others) was written to help early faithful follow a faithful path as discerned at the time – when I got to that last line:

"But the way of the wicked will perish"

I focused on “the way” as perishing, not the wicked. It wasn’t the people who needed to perish – but “the way”: the wrong-headedness of the behaviors and injustices done to others. The path needed to go/be closed - and, when it was no longer an open road – then those who had been lead in that direction – however that might have happened – will have to choose again. Find a new way.

I wonder if that isn’t part of what the psalmists were writing about as they looked around at their society, shaking their heads at some of the things the people were doing – connecting the acts with the people rather than the path they were on.

In my marketing and sales management days, when I used to do sales training, I would always tell the reps that if they could identify and remove the objections to the sale – the sale would fall into their laps. Some got it and some found that to be too much work. But it’s that kind of thinking I find percolating here.

If we can remove the obstacles to peace that are on the path, well, maybe peace would just fall into our laps.

If we could eliminate the objections to justice – it might follow that justice would emerge.

If we could remove the objections and reticence to loving one another with the love that Jesus had, or at least approaching the love that he had – then hatred, the path of hatred, violence, injustice – should just end up going “Poof!” Like a big ol’ bad balloon that just lost all its air.

This is not original thinking, even if turned in an original way.

Islamic mysticism or Sufism, for example, talks about obstacles on the path. Part of their teachings has to do with the *naf* or ego and how it gets in the way of one’s relationship with God. The paths that emerge from the *naf* are like a fork in the road: one path is the way of reducing the dominance of ego to allow the presence of God within each of us to effervesce; the other is a path where ego dominates, bringing with it the need for gratification and the behaviors called upon to satisfy such cravings.

In my own life, I have known times when my ego has been suspended for a moment or two and the peace that has come with that. I have also known times of intense and driven ego – and all the anxiousness and uncertainty of *naf* out of control.

In truth, the latter has often been the segue (kick in the butt at times) into the desert.

So, it seems to me that these paths are intertwined in some shape similar to the double-helix of DNA. We weave in and out, moving forward, hopefully removing the obstacles along the way, not just so we can feel better about ourselves, but so that we can pass along the journey that has led us here – to where we are today.

As with modern writing, so, too, with that of the ancients – the written word is always an account of some direction and the consequences – one way or the other. The Scriptures are indications of what people did to be faithful during times when it must have often felt like, “Here we are suffering – trying to do everything right, while others who disregard and manipulate the law prosper in their wicked ways.” These writings, part of the wisdom literature, were meant to help people through their doubts and temptations – often with extreme promises of what would befall them were they to sway.

They were teaching: encapsulated narratives of what a faithful people did in struggling to move through the twists and turns of that double helix of a path and stay true to their faith, their God, and in so doing – themselves.

Perhaps that is what is most difficult today. Staying the course in not always the most comfortable path.

Christians in this world could easily write their own series of psalms, with all of the same laments. In fact, we do just that when we gather. We are the psalms and the prayers of the faithful – trying to be faithful. We are the people working in the name of Jesus and other traditions to remove the obstacles from the paths of others so they, too, can find the way that God is calling them.

For me, it's not about proselytizing one way or the other, but it is about helping others to be free enough to find the God in their lives through our practices and witness. From there, the Spirit leads to way. Would it surprise you to hear me say it doesn't matter to me which God they find – as long as they find God?

I find Christianity – at its core – to be welcoming, with the potential for being radically inviting! It is the servant Jesus always refers to. The servant that clears the path to peace, love, justice – without designing what it must look like for others.

This morning we welcomed Nina, Mercy, and Catherine – our sisters – in to the formal membership of this church. In truth, for me, they and others were already members of this church before they stood in this space to say so, but this morning's service was a very important public witness to what is in their hearts and how they are drawn here from deeply within.

Each of them and all of us has a different knowing of what that is: the power of God in each of us that somehow calls: “Come as I have created you. I will take care of the rest. I need you. Come.”

In Mark's reading this morning, we have the second of three predictions of Jesus' upcoming crucifixion and resurrection. We also have the well known story of the disciples traveling and arguing about who would be first in the "kingdom" when the time came. Remember...

Jesus overhears the debate and asks, "What were you arguing about along the way?" Silence.

In school, I will sometimes walk up behind some students and stand there quietly while they go on and on being a high schooler, as their friend try and let them know that I am there. Of course they don't get it for a while and then suddenly turn around and go, "Oh, hi Mr. B!" startled and then silent (sometimes).

So, it wasn't such a leap for me to see this sort of thing happening with Jesus and the disciples. Here they were walking along, so engaged in their conversation about who was the best among them and who deserved the best place of reward when the time came – that they didn't see Jesus right behind them. And as soon as they did and he questioned them – they went silent.

And then Jesus, again, tries to help them to understand his teachings and the path to follow:

"Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all."

And in reference to the child,

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

It is Jesus as teacher and mystic, no separation of righteous and wicked – simply "all." And then in a careful and gentle way, Jesus admonishes them, I think:

"It's not about you, guys – or even about me; it's about the one who sent me."

And, it is the one who sent Jesus that calls us onto this path into a broken and injured world in need of healing. It is the great paradox, I think, that to be an effective healer, we must first have felt the brokenness in our own lives.

We again become the psalm of old – we who were broken, remained faithful – and we are here to help you find your way, as witness to the power of God in our lives and in yours. Come. Follow us as you are. All of you.

Whatever our paths, that is our how I hear the call as Christians and members of this church of Palisades. It is what I see happening here over and over again. Folks who for one reason or another moved away from the "church" they knew

and wandered in here, maybe from the desert, to pray for a while – and some to stay. Didn't matter – door's open, path's open, come on in.

On this weekend in the first of Jewish months – Tishrei – of the New year 5767 – let us embrace and be grateful for this gift of hospitality that has come into our hands from all those who have gone before us, right back to the sixth day of creation, however that may have happened, when God's design for human emerged. Let us, on this day, celebrate with our Jewish sisters and brothers the symbol of a new beginning and the exhilaration of paths ahead being firmly joined with those who have gone before, without regretting what it has taken to get us here. And let us welcome the uncertainty of times ahead with a sense of trust, faith, and the knowing that we are being guided.

Many of you, hopefully all of you, will stay after services for a discussion that will lead to the completion of the mission study for this congregation – a very important step on the way to calling the permanent pastor who will be with you into the time ahead.

In a very literal and real way – it all leads to today and what we have at hand that we are called to do.

This congregation has a most glorious history, present, and undeniable future that will bring you all to places the Spirit has yet to reveal.

The Path is blessed, loving, and inviting to all – just as you always have been. Godspeed in what is ahead. For the joy is in the journey, and it has, once again – just begun.

Amen.