

Psa. 119:9-16, 33-37, 105 How can young people keep their way pure?

By guarding it according to your word.

- 10 With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
- 11 I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
- 12 Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes.
- 13 With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
- 14 I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
- 15 I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
- 16 I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.
- 33 Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.
- 34 Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.
- 35 Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.
- 36 Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.
- 37 Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.
- 105 Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

September 10, 2017
Celebration Sunday

Going Back to Find Jesus

Psalm 119:9-16, 33-37, 105

Luke 2:41-49

When Jesus was twelve years old, his parents lost him. Mary and Joseph lost the Son of God. They had traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, and when it was time to go home, they began the walk with the dozens, maybe hundreds, of other people from the Galilee region. Jesus, however, stays behind in Jerusalem, and his parents, assuming he is walking with friends, don't know their son is not with them till the end of the day. The moment you come to the shocking realization that you have misplaced the only Son of God, you really have no choice but to return to Jerusalem to search for him. When you lose something – or someone – of great and precious value, the only thing to do is go back and look for it. You cannot keep moving forward toward Nazareth when the boy God has entrusted to you is somewhere behind you.

Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed this out in a sermon he preached early in his ministry. Let me read a few sentences of the point he was making.

Sometimes, it's necessary to go backward in order to go forward. That's an analogy of life...And so that was the thing that Jesus' parents realized, that they had to go back and find this mighty precious value that they had left behind, in order to go forward. And so they went back to Jerusalem and discovered Jesus, rediscovered him so to speak, in order to go forward to Nazareth.

Now that's what we've got to do in our world today. We've left a lot of precious values behind; we've lost a lot of precious values. And if we are to go forward, if we are to make this a better world in which to live, we've got to go back. We've got to rediscover these precious values that we've left behind.¹

Sixty-three years later, Dr. King's words hold greater truth than they did when he first said them. Today we are a people whose eyes are set on the road ahead of us, the road to Nazareth. We don't look back much. The past is past. We've got to get home, get back to work; Jerusalem is behind us and our focus is on the road ahead. And we are completely blind to the fact that we have left something terribly precious behind.

What is it we have forgotten? The Bible. The life-giving wisdom of Scripture. The passion and hunger to learn God's law and Jesus' Way. Did you hear the passion in the words of Psalm 119?

With my whole heart I seek you;

I treasure your word in my heart,

I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

This kind of craving for spiritual nourishment through the Word of God is rare these days. For us, the road from Jerusalem to Nazareth is an eight lane highway and we're trying to keep track of the semi-truck beside us, and the speedster on our back bumper, and the traffic slowdown ahead of us, all the while settling a fight between the kids in the back seat. There's no time to pull the car over to quietly sit down to read and contemplate scripture. For the majority of us who even do a daily devotional, it is one verse of scripture and a paragraph-long story, more like a spiritual vitamin pill in the morning, or a sleeping pill at night, instead of a meal to nourish our souls all day long.

And we don't even realize that somewhere back there we left something precious, something vital behind. We, too, lost God's son. God's word. God's gift.

Our reading this morning began by asking, "How can young people keep their way pure?" Or, another translation words it, "How can a young person live a clean life?"

It's a question every one of us needs to ponder because we all made a promise when every single young person in our church was baptized to teach them the way of Christ. Are they learning how to keep their way pure through the music they hear? Are they learning a healthy and self-respecting sexuality through the movies they watch, or social media? How can young people keep their way pure, or have any understanding of what wisdom or morality or the sacredness of their bodies is about?

The Psalmist answers his own question: *By guarding it according to your word.*

¹ Carson, Clayborne; Holloran, Peter. *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Kindle Locations 310-315). Hachette Book Group. Kindle Edition.

Parents, I know you want to, you care, and most of the time you feel like you're swimming upstream against a flood of values counter to Christ's way. How are you doing with trying to keep your young people's way in line with Christ's way? We are here to help. We've got women and men who take time every week to prepare a lesson about God's word. They are here every week ready to help you help your kids learn and live Christ's way.

You make sure they do their homework...

You make sure they make it to practice...

You make sure they get to their games or matches or meets or recitals.

You're keeping a close watch in so many other areas of their lives...

But in the craziness of your road-to-Nazareth lives, have you left behind the most important thing – the nourishment of their spiritual lives; how to live according to Christ's teachings. One of the earliest terms Christians used to describe themselves was, "Followers of the Way." Our young people can't be followers of the way if we never teach them what that way is.

And here's the thing: I don't know any parent who hungers *personally* for spiritual nourishment for themselves, who doesn't also desire that nourishment for their children. If we are not instilling this hunger to learn the great joy of the message of the Bible and the great wisdom about how to live Christ-like lives; and the great stories of God's faithfulness to us even when we let God down, it is because we adults do not have that hunger in ourselves. How many of us feel the passion for God's will we hear in this psalm? Twelve times in this one psalm the phrase is repeated, "Teach me." How many of us have that as our mantra, our daily prayer?

How many of us truly believe the best known verse of this psalm that God's word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path?" We will read the parenting books and ask of them, "Teach me how to raise my kids." We will read the money books, asking, "Teach me how to handle my money." We will read the management and leadership books, pleading, "Teach me how to move up the corporate ladder." We will read the time management books, begging, "Teach me how to make the most of my hours and days." But how many of us read the Bible asking God, "Teach me your statutes, your will, your way, your principles for life, your methods for enduring when the storms of life overtake me"?

Friends, here is a frightening truth: it is possible to say we believe in God, but to deny his existence with our actions. I'm pretty confident that no one here this morning would call himself an atheist. But there are two different kinds of atheism: theoretical atheism and practical atheism. A Theoretical atheist plainly says, "I don't believe in God." Practical atheists say, "I believe in God," but do not live it, do not practice what our lips say we believe. We get all upset when we read about theoretical atheists trying to take God out of the classroom or out of other parts of public life, but that's not nearly as dangerous as practical atheists saying they believe, but not living it, and I believe there are many in the church who would never claim to be theoretical atheists, but who are practical atheists who have left God behind.

And this is totally unintentional. Mary and Joseph did not intentionally leave Jesus back in Jerusalem. And none of us has intentionally decided to proclaim Christ with our lips while we deny him with our lives. We just got busy with other things and figured Jesus would take care of himself while we focused on the career and the bank account and the homework and grades, soccer games and dance recitals. The question is when we're going to realize that we left Jesus back in Jerusalem. We didn't mean to, but it's what we did. The end of the day comes, the sun begins to set, darkness descends, and then we realize that we lost the lamp the lights our way when life gets dark and cold.

But the question is, when we realize what we have left behind, will we be as wise as Mary and Joseph about the need to go back, and recover what we nearly lost?

Today is a day of new beginnings. It is New Year's Day for the church year. It is a day in which we get to make a new choice.

It's a great time to head back to Jerusalem and find Jesus; restart our spiritual journey; recover that hunger to live what we believe, to say,

"Teach me your way, show me your will, help me to delight in your truth.

For your word is lamp unto my feet and a light to my path."