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Summer Road Trip Through the Psalms 2. Getting on the Road

Psalm 25:4-10 adapted from The Message Take me by the hand; Lead me down the path of truth. You are my Savior, aren't you? Mark the milestones of your mercy and love, GOD; Rebuild the ancient landmarks! Forget that I sowed wild oats; Mark me with your sign of love. Plan only the best for me, GOD! GOD is fair and just; correcting the misdirected, sending them in the right direction. God takes the rejects by the hand, And leads them step-by-step. From now on every road you travel Will take you to GOD. Follow the Covenant signs; Read the charted directions.

Psalm 121:8 NRSV The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Life is a journey. That overused but nonetheless accurate saying is behind our sermon series for this summer, a “road trip” through the Psalms. Eugene Peterson’s Message translation brings out in a way that the more traditional translations don’t just how many journey and travel images and metaphors can be found throughout the Psalms. Today’s Psalm is no different; did you hear those references? *“the path of truth.” “The right direction.” “Every road you travel.”* And, obeyed by no male I’ve ever found who has the courage to admit to it, *“Read the directions.”* Last Sunday we started this series talking about the steps you take before a journey: packing, getting a good guide for your trip, and knowing when to jettison the guide. We discovered that packing things you won’t need or which won’t help you makes your journey less fulfilling than it could be when you take along with you on new trips old resentments and angers and fears that do not better your life.

Today, then, we are packed, and hopefully packed well, and it’s time, as it were, to get on the road. And those opening moments of our journey can indeed be crucial for how well the whole journey will go. Let me tell you a story: When I was training for my private pilot’s license, one of the requirements was to make a solo cross country flight of several hundred miles. Barbara and I were living in the far west Texas desert

then and there weren't a lot of options for airports to achieve such a trip in the least time for the least money (plane rental doesn't come cheap). So I flight-planned the trip, packing, as it were for the journey, had my instructor approve my routing whose first leg was to be from Odessa, Texas, to Hobbes, New Mexico. Nervous, but excited I pre-flighted the plane and then was off into the clear but windy west Texas sky. An hour later I knew I should have been seeing the Hobbes airport by then, but all I could see was an endless desert dotted with oilfield pump jacks and crisscrossed with their gravel service roads. Finally, after a few more minutes, I spotted a small town and its airport. I headed for it and made an uneventful landing even in the strong desert crosswind. As I taxied I saw the terminal building: "Welcome to Carlsbad" it said. Oops. Turns out that my meticulous flight planning had been correct when it indicated the heading to fly from Odessa to Hobbes was 350 degrees, but my fumble fingers had set the heading indicator for 330 degrees.

How you start your journey, how you begin a new venture or a new direction in your life can indeed make a crucial difference in where you go and how you get there – or whether you get there at all! A pastor by the name of Alice Shirey says that this Psalm encourages us to pray three things as we start and continue our journeys.¹ I did not print the verses that come before today's selection, but they start out this way: "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I put my trust." The first prayer, then, she says that the Psalm invites us to pray as we get on the road is this, "In you, Lord my God, I put my trust."

Now, that could sound like a nice soporific, embroidered-on-a-hand-towel sentiment without much meaning to it. But it's not. Why not? Well, she also notes the curious construction of that sentence. Not just "I trust you," but "I **put** my trust" in you.

¹All quotes from or references to her are from <http://www.thesermonnotes.com/three-things-psalm-25-gives-us-permission-to-ask-for/>

She says that that verb signals not just an accidental or shallow trusting in the God whom we want to get us parking spaces and open up a line at the grocery right when we need it. That kind of shallow, simple, theology is all around us and will collapse when any weight is put on it, when any roadblocks arise in our journeys, when the way isn't clear and we are lost. No, "putting" your trust in God she says, "...signifies effort. You don't just put something somewhere for no reason. You put something somewhere with intentionality. The Psalmist is choosing to put trust in God." This is not simply "Let go and let God." No, this takes work and effort on our parts. And then Rev. Shirey illustrates by using a striking image: "Have you seen a shot-putter? It takes great effort to spin around and throw that ball as far as you can. The look they have on their faces that displays all the energy it takes to throw. Putting your trust in God is hard work." After all, it's not just called a "shot," it's a shot-**put**.

And she's right. It takes sometimes enormous effort to put your trust in the wisdom and ways of a God who tells you that on your journey you will meet people unlike you and that your job is to welcome them and learn from them instead of being suspicious of them or hateful to them. It takes sometimes enormous effort to put your trust in a God whose Son renounced easy violence when so many fellow-travelers would tell you that the way to have a good journey is to arm yourself with more and more weapons. For, as Rev. Shirey says, "If you can start your day this way, trusting God, it will change the trajectory of your life." *"O my God, in you I put my trust."*

The Psalm also invites us to pray a second prayer, she says. This is one place, though, that Peterson's paraphrase falls short. He renders the Psalmist's prayer as "Forget that I sowed wild oats," but that's much too puny, much too small. Traditional translations more accurately put it this way, and the Psalmist actually says it twice: *"Do not let me be put to shame."* **Shame**. There is no question that the feeling of shame can put life's journey on a skewed course from the outset. Psychologist Brené Brown

calls it the most powerful of our emotions and it can truly damage us and others in ways that can take a very long time to heal, if ever.

It's important to note that shame is different from guilt. We sometimes get them confused. Guilt is about an action that you shouldn't have done. It's not about who you are, it's about something you did. One writer says this: "Guilt is just as powerful [as shame], but its influence is positive...."² Now it may sound odd to you that guilt is positive, but it is. A warranted sense of guilt for having done something that was not worthy, that did not live up to your usually high ethical standards, is an indication that you need to truly recognize your error, to apologize to the person whom you hurt, and to seek to make amends. Those are positive things indeed, and Twelve Step groups recognize how truly crucial that process is for becoming a better person, for correcting your journey's course. Now, some actions are so truly horrific that it may seem impossible that anything could ever even begin to make amends, but those really aren't the ones, I daresay, that you and I are guilty of.

Shame, though, is different. Shame is about who you are, your very self. Shame is the sense that you are unworthy, that you deserve blame just because you exist. A psychologist named Mary Lamia describes it this way: shame is an "internal state of inadequacy, unworthiness, dishonor, or regret" and it leads "you to feel as though your whole self is flawed, bad, or subject to exclusion...."³ It's a destructive emotion in two ways: It leads you to isolate yourself; as Rev. Shirey says, "One reason shame is so powerful is it's ability to make us feel alone. Shame loves to isolate and get people away from community. Shame whispers worthlessness to us and causes damage." And, secondly, shame is contagious; it can cause us to hurt and bully and

²<http://www.thecoachingroom.com.au/blog/bren%C3%A9-brown-on-shame-the-most-powerful-master-emotion>

³All references to or quotes from her are from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/intense-emotions-and-strong-feelings/201104/shame-concealed-contagious-and-dangerous-emotion>

demean others as a defense against our sense of worthlessness. We project our state of being on to others in ways that hurts us both. Or, in Dr. Lamia's words, "Blaming or denigrating others serves to disown what the shameful person feels.... In order to escape shame's self-diminishing effects, a person might instead denigrate others or express contempt toward them,... finding flaws in others so that they become the one who is shameful." And that pattern can be terribly destructive; again Dr. Lamia says this: "The anger experienced by a person who is shamed is like an all-consuming poison.... But if a person who is consumed by shame manages to transfer shame to a loved one, then that person will experience its overwhelming toxic repercussions... [and] can physically and emotionally make [him or her] ill." No wonder, then, that this second prayer of Psalm 25 is indeed, "Do not let me be put to shame," for it is a much-needed prayer if our journey's course is to be true.

And what's the third prayer that Rev. Shirey says this psalm asks us to pray as we make our journeys through life? *Rescue me*. Rescue me. Or, as Petersons' translation puts it: "correct [me when I'm] misdirected, send [me] in the right direction." I don't know about you, but those times when I most often need rescuing are when I've decided to have a pity party, or when I oh-so want to make a snarky remark, or when I give in to saying mean or hurtful things even to those whom I love the most. Why do we do that? I believe that we are most vulnerable to such behavior – and most in need of rescue – when we forget to be grateful and to express that gratitude both to other people and to God. I've quoted the great preacher Gardner Taylor before, but his words are apt for why we sometimes need rescuing on our journeys; listen to his words: "*I have never known anyone,*" he says, "*who was truly grateful who was at the same time small or petty or bitter or mean greedy or selfish or who could take any pleasure in anyone else's pain.*" I have experienced just how right Rev. Taylor is, for on that long-ago day when I inadvertently found myself in Carlsbad instead of Hobbes, I felt a pity

party coming on and a sense of shame welling up. I called my flight instructor, knowing I was going to get chewed out. But this is what he said: "The pilot who says he or she has never been lost is either a fool or a liar. Be grateful that you got being lost out of the way so soon. I'm grateful that you're safe. Now, get back in the plane and finish your trip."

His gratitude was contagious. His words were exactly the words I needed to stunt that shame and slay that self-pity. It was then that I too could become grateful, and not just worried sick about my misadventure. I began to notice the incredible blue of the sky and how you could seemingly see forever. I began to notice the stark and awesome beauty of the desert around me, the ocher-colored hills shimmering in the distance. I was able to hear the good natured teasing of the folks at the Carlsbad airport not as taunts but as words of comfort and understanding from fellow travelers who had also occasionally done a silly thing or two in their lives. I was able to be thankful for the extra money that summer that had allowed me to pursue that life-long dream, and for a wonderful spouse who took delight in my dream.

In that moment, I truly believe that I had been rescued from going down a path that would have made life's journey more painful and misguided than it needed to be. But there's more: to those whom God has rescued from wrong turns and pity parties and shame comes the obligation and opportunity to go and do likewise. For you and I can be, far more than we will ever realize, the instruments through which God can work: the comforting or lighthearted word to one in need, the welcome to the stranger, the hospitality to the lost are all ways in which God can continue to work through you and through me.

Will you pray with me? God as we get on the road of whatever journey life has for us, we pray, indeed, that we might put our trust in you, that we might never be put to shame, and that you would rescue us with the gifts of gratitude and hope and courage

and joy. In the name of the Christ who goes with us. Amen.