

The Way Through

1 Peter 3:18-22

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Christianity, God has raised up men and women to serve as pastors. Some of those pastors have been blessed to serve in larger congregations and big cities. Their names become well known and people flock to hear them preach.

Other pastors serve their entire careers in small rural churches, far away from the fame and fortune of the more prosperous congregations.

George Young was one of the latter. He was an obscure preacher in the late 19th century, a man who loved God and loved his calling, but also a man who had to work as a carpenter in order to provide for his family. And even then, his income barely made ends meet.

But through all the ups and downs George and his faithful wife never wavered in their faithfulness to God and to the congregations they served. After many years, George and his family were finally able to move into their own small home (which George built himself). They were delighted with their new home, but unfortunately their joy was short-lived.

One Sunday morning when the family was attending worship at the church where George was pastor, some local thugs—who didn't like his Gospel preaching—set fire to the house. By the time the family got home from church, the house and all of its contents were totally destroyed. That experience prompted George to write a Gospel hymn we know as "God Leads Us Along."

Sometimes on the mount where the sun shines so bright,
God leads His dear children along;
Sometimes in the valley, in darkest of night,
God leads His dear children along.

Though sorrows befall us and evils oppose,
God leads His dear children along;
Through grace we can conquer, defeat all our foes,
God leads His dear children along.

Refrain: Some through the waters, some through the flood,
Some through the fire, but all through the blood;
Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song,
In the night season and all the day long.

The key word in that refrain is "through." God leads His dear children "through." Through the waters, through the flood, through the fire, and through times of great sorrow, God leads His dear children THROUGH.

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Forty-two days from today it will be Easter Sunday! Can you believe it? Over these next 42 days, our worship goal is to follow the way of Jesus closely. He has called every one of us to follow Him.

The world is filled with so-called alternative routes. The false teachers of this world would have you believe that there are "many paths" that would lead you to heaven. But that's not true. This 2000 year-old Lenten season is NOT about many ways. It is about THE WAY. The only way. As our theme verse proclaims:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

If you worshipped with us on Ash Wednesday, you heard me describe that verse as one every Christian needs to know by heart. I would like you to memorize it if you don't already know it. Because if you are firmly convinced that this IS the Gospel truth, you won't fall victim to those who offer alternative paths.

Jesus is THE WAY. And today we focus on how He is the WAY THROUGH.

In our Gospel reading we heard how Jesus CAME THROUGH the time of testing in the wilderness, strengthened for the news of John's imprisonment and ready for His earthly ministry. The other two of our three readings today retell a familiar story: Noah and the ark.

- As George Young's song reminded us, God brings us THROUGH the floods too.

Let me make three observations:

OBSERVATION #1: IN ORDER TO GO THROUGH IT, YOU HAVE TO BE IN IT

Noah could not come through the flood if it had never started to rain.

- Jesus could not have come through the temptations, if He had not gone into the wilderness.
- George Young could not have come through the fire, if his house had never been burned down.
- You cannot feel the comfort of God if you have never experienced loss.
- You cannot know the grace of God if you have never messed up.

You can't come THROUGH something you have never experienced.

Psalms 23 is the most frequently requested passage of Scripture in every funeral I am asked to so. There is a wonderful verse that I often emphasize whenever I read share it with those who are grieving:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.
For Thou art with me. (Psalm 23:4)

In order to walk through that valley, I have to walk into it first.

You've heard this before: God never promises to build a shield around us to keep negative things from happening to us.

- If you believe that somehow you are immune from bad news just because you go to church or read your Bible, you are believing one of those lies I talked about a few moments ago.

He has, however, promised to bring us through them, safely to the other side.

It is those negative events in our lives that build our faith. The Epistle of James is one of several places that tell us that:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

THE WAY of Jesus is not designed to be a way that is problem-free. But as we go through those problems, He goes THROUGH them WITH us.

OBSERVATION #2: GOD DOESN'T BRING US THERE TO LEAVE US THERE

When Noah and his family got on the boat, the plan was for them to eventually get off the boat. But it took a while.

- All totaled Noah and his family lived on the ark for more than a year.
 - They entered the ark one week before the flood started,
 - And the flood lasted for 40 days and 40 nights.
 - They left the ark on the 27th day of the second month of the following year.
 - The total duration of Noah's time on the ark can be estimated as 378 days.
- But they got off the boat.

Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives.
(Genesis 8:16)

The point is: God did not put them on that ark in order to leave them on the ark. No, the ark was merely the vessel to get them THROUGH.

- For Jesus, the wilderness lasted 40 days.
- For the children of Israel, their captivity in Egypt lasted nearly 500 years.
- The Apostle Paul spent just three days in total darkness. Not long at all when compared to the others.

The length of time any of us spend inside our negative circumstances will vary.

- The old adage related to grief is that you don't make any major decisions for a year, because in about a year you will be all the way through the grief cycle.
 - It took me a lot longer than that after the death of my mother.

Grief, anger, bitterness, grudges – all that stuff and more is common to the human expression, but none of it is a final destination any more than the ark was the final home for Noah.

- God doesn't allow us to experience any of that stuff in order to leave us there.
- All of it has a natural role to play in our lives. They are protective measures, coping measures, growth points ... but never final destinations.

Following Jesus often means that we become willing to get off the ark where we have lingered long enough.

OBSERVATION #3: THE WAY THROUGH ALWAYS INVOLVES TRUSTING WHAT GOD HAS SAID

Way back before it rained – before Noah ever started to build his boat – God made a promise to him.

(God speaking to Noah): I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens... But I will establish my covenant with you... (Genesis 6:17-18)

And for more than a year Noah floated on the waters in that boat until the day God brought him out again. And kept His promise. Noah believed it, and God it.

I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you... (Genesis 9:9)

It wasn't a part of today's Gospel reading, but when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He too relied on Scriptures to resist what the devil threw at Him.

In my first congregation there was this wonderful saint of God, Mildred Nelson. At one point in her life she couldn't get out of bed because the room was spinning. She laid in the dark for many weeks and all she could do was recite the Scriptures she had memorized throughout her life. She is with Jesus now, but if she were here she would tell you clearly that God's Word brought her through.

Your Bible is filled with verses for every point in your life. Are you ...

- Angry? Proverbs 15:1
- Fearful? 2 Timothy 1:7
- Stressed? Matthew 11:28
- Anxious? Matthew 6:33

The entire 119th Psalm – all 176 verses of it – are a testimony to the wonder of God's Word. Read it. Know it. Memorize it. And when you are walking through those valleys, recite it. And through it God will bring you through to the other side.

APPLICATION

One of my favorite Biblical images is found in 1 Samuel 7:

While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites... Then Samuel took a stone and set it up. He named it Ebenezer, which means, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

Wherever you may be on your spiritual journey, God has brought you this far. And He will continue to lead you through.

Amen.