

Finding Our Way

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Scripture

Proverbs 4:10-18

Hear, my child, and accept my words,
that the years of your life may be many.
I have taught you the way of wisdom;
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
When you walk, your step will not be hampered,
and if you run, you will not stumble.
Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;
guard her, for she is your life.
Do not enter the path of the wicked,
and do not walk in the way of evildoers.
Avoid it; do not go on it;
turn away from it and pass on.
For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;
they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.
For they eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence.
But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

John 14:1-14

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Sermon

A well-loved gospel hymn from a generation or two or three ago was *In the Garden*. I remember hearing it and singing it growing up. It was written in 1912 by the American songwriter C. Austin Miles (1868-1946), a former pharmacist, who composed it "in a cold, dreary and leaky basement in Pitman, New Jersey that didn't even have a window in it let alone a view of garden." [1] The famous evangelist Billy Sunday (1862-1935) popularized the song and sang it at his revivals throughout the United States early in the the last century. Roy Rogers and Dale Evans recorded it in 1950. Tennessee Ernie Ford, Perry Como, Rosemary Clooney, Doris Day, Willie Nelson, and the Statler Brothers have all made recordings of the hymn. It's sung in the closing scene of the beautiful film from 1984, *Places in the Heart*, starring Sally Field and Danny Glover. Garrison Keillor and Meryl Streep recorded a version for *Prairie Home Companion*. There was a time when it was regularly requested for funerals and memorial services. It might feel too sentimental for many today, expressing a piety that feels foreign. Maybe it's still a favorite of yours. I don't believe it ever made it into a Presbyterian hymnal.

Here's the first verse: "I come to the garden alone, / While the dew is still on the roses; / And the voice I hear, falling on my ear, / The Son of God discloses." But it's the refrain that came to mind this week reflecting on these texts and preparing for the adult ed series: "And He walks with me, and He talks with me, / And He tells me I am His own, / And the joy we share as we tarry there, / None other has ever known." You can feel the pious sentimentality coming through the words. It's not the most sophisticated theological hymn ever written, but it's not trying to be. Much of its sensitivities have been dismissed by a more liberal-progressive church. If there's one element of the hymn that is biblically and theologically grounded, it's the confession, "And he walks with me, and he talks with me." Just do an online search for every time some form of "walk" shows up in the Bible, and it becomes clear that you and I were created to walk with God, that God walks with us, and that God *wants* to walk with us, to show us the way, to lead us on the safe way, on the *good* way that leads to life.

We're told in Genesis that Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze" (Gen. 3:8). We hear in Leviticus 26:12, "And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people." Deuteronomy 8:6 says, "Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways..." In Joshua 22:5, we hear, "Take good care to observe the commandment and instruction that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all God's ways, to keep God's commandments, and to hold fast to God, and to serve God with all your heart and with all your soul." Throughout the Psalms, we are invited, again and again, to walk with God and warned about walking the paths of evildoers. The psalmist asks, who may dwell in the presence of the Lord? "Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart" (15:2). Even when we walk through the darkest valley, God promises to be present, like a good shepherd (Psalm 23). The psalmist prays, "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name" (Ps. 86:11). The prophet Isaiah wrote, "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" (Is. 2:5).

These verses, and this is just a sampling, put the Proverbs text in context. Here the goodness and faithfulness of God are on full display. God loves us so much that God provides a way for God's people. Listen again: "I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. When you walk, your step will not be hampered; and if you run, you will not stumble" (Prov. 4:11-12).

But as we all know, there are many possible ways we can walk. There are pathways that lead to life, and there are pathways that lead us far away from God, ways that lead us into exile,

into alien, fearful places, down the path of the wicked and the way of evil. Sometimes we feel like we've wandered so far from the true path that we can never get back on track. Sometimes we are lost. Perhaps you feel lost now. While all this might be true now and again in our lives, it is not God's hope and dream for us. For God wants us to want to walk with God. God wants to walk with us and talk with us as we walk and teach us things and discover things as we walk, things only God can teach us and show us, such as all that makes for grace and love and compassion and justice and joy.

Knowing this—knowing that this was God's intent from the beginning, and remains God's dream and joy, that we would walk with God and know that God wants to walk with us—claiming this to be true, informs how we hear Jesus say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14: 6). As we know, this verse can be problematic as it sounds so exclusive. Is Jesus the *only* way to God? Are there many ways? Jesus said earlier in John that he has "other sheep that do not belong to this fold" (Jn. 10:16). These are important questions. Questions that you must answer yourself. Sometimes the question of whether Jesus is the only way simply becomes an intellectual exercise, a kind of a defense against or excuse for never stepping out to see whether it's true.

Evangelical writer Rachel Held Evans once said, "I am a Christian because the story of Jesus is the story I'm willing to risk being wrong about." [2] With all due respect to Evans, we can modify her claim this way, "I am a Christian because the *way* of Jesus is the *way* I'm willing to risk being wrong about." And how would do we know whether we are wrong? Follow, that is, walk with him. Jesus says, *Come walk with me and see. Walk in the light of my presence. Train your eyes on me, and the path will always be true and life-giving.* "I am the Way; that is, the truth and the life." [3] The emphasis should be on Jesus as *Way*. Truth and life are descriptions of what we discover on the *Way*. Think of me, Jesus says, as a road. *Walk my way. Walk my way with me. Walk on me and allow me to take you to where you need to go. Be on the way with me.*

I love that the earliest followers of Jesus were not known as Christians but as people of the *Way*. We are fellow walkers of the one who said, "I am way." (See Acts 9:1-2, 19:9, 19:23, 22:4, 24:14).

He is way; he is the road toward truth and life. And we discover truth and life when we step out, risk stepping out, on the road. Step by step we go, walking with him and discovering the world and our lives within it, through his eyes, as he walks with us and talks with us, as we share the road with him—and trust him to know the way. He knows the way. He knows where we're going and need to go. He will not leave us. We can't get lost. The way with him leads us, as Jesus said, to the Father, that is to source of all goodness, to God. And all God wants from us is a walk. Everything else we need to know and will discover, the greater works that God requires of us today (John 14:12) we'll figure out *on* the way. But we have to step out.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's (1892-1973) epic adventure *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf says, "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no telling where you might be swept too."

We are called to step out on the way, take the risk and step out. Take one step and then another and another. "[M]y left foot says 'Glory,' and my right foot says 'Amen.'" [4] That's how Annie Dillard describes our lives on the pilgrim journey, in her classic work *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. My left says, "Glory," and my right foot says, "Amen." *Glory-Amen*. Step by step. *Glory-Amen*. Step after step. *Glory-Amen*. *Glory-Amen*. All the way home.



Image: A mile marker along the Camino de Santiago

Sources

- [1] According to Miles' great-granddaughter Nadine Mesnard Alldridge. Cited here: mnkurmudge.blogspot.com/2005/02/lifes-little-ironies-austin-miles-goes.html
- [2] Rachel Held Evans and Jeff Chu, *Wholehearted Faith* (HarperOne, 2022).
- [3] Jaime Clark-Soles' translation of John 14:6 in *Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 93.
- [4] Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 271.