

On a Journey, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. L1090301
Psalm 25:1-10 and Mark 1:9-15
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It takes work to go backpacking. Sue and I have backpacked in the High Peaks Region of the Adirondack Mountains in New York State. There is the preparation for the journey such as purchasing the equipment including cookstove, sleeping bags, tent, poncho, food, utensils, and first aid kit. Make sure you have the proper clothing, the most important being the shoes. You need to get a topographic map of the area so you know where you're going.

There is the journey itself: rising early in the morning, eating breakfast and packing everything into the backpack; hiking the steep hills, and worse, descending the hills (that can really hurt the leg muscles if you're not prepared); and taking breaks for rest and food. At the end of the day there can be, along with the weariness and sore feet, a real sense of accomplishment. Along the way, there have been beautiful views of scenery, flowers, trees, and animals. There have been challenges of walking across streams, clinging to rocks, and jumping over or walking on fallen trees.

Some choose not to go to the trouble. They would rather sit at home watching TV. They might even ask, "Why bother with all that effort? I can see mountain images on my TV. I can even travel the whole world with Google Earth on my computer."

If one is willing to make the effort, though, backpacking or hiking can be a wonderful experience. There is plenty of time to think, to wonder, to meditate, and to experience God's creation and, it creates memories that last a lifetime. It is worth the effort to make the journey.

On Ash Wednesday, we began a Lenten journey. Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is the period of forty days preceding Easter, if you subtract out the Sundays. It echoes Jesus' forty days in the wilderness immediately following his baptism and preceding the arrest of John the Baptizer which marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Forty days with God is a regular occurrence in the Bible. Noah spent forty days in the ark while it was raining and flooding outside.¹ Moses was on the mountain with God for forty days getting the ten commandments.² The giant Goliath taunted the Israelite soldiers for forty days before David came on the scene.³ The Prophet Elijah spent forty days in the wilderness of Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God in the Sinai peninsula.⁴

The Lenten journey takes preparation and work. It takes planning, setting aside the time, and it takes the effort of thinking, questioning, and meditating. Some would rather not go to the trouble. They might even ask, "Why bother with all that effort?"

Why bother? I would like to know that I am not alone on my journey through life. Forty days is not an inordinate amount of time to ask to spend with God. We begin our Lenten journey today with the words of the Psalmist, "Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long."⁵

¹Genesis 7:4

²Exodus 24:7

³1 Samuel 17:16

⁴1 Kings 19:8

⁵Psalm 25:4-5

We miss some of the nuances of this Psalm because we are reading it in English, not its original Hebrew. Psalm Twenty-five is an acrostic. Each verse begins with one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

The Psalms embody the full range of human emotion. They are honest communication with God. Their words contain longing for God, disappointment with God, and requests for mercy.

We heard the psalmist say what he would like to have happen to his enemies. If we are honest with ourselves, we know we have the same kind of feelings, feelings we would not mention in polite company, especially polite religious company. Nevertheless, these are the feelings we share with God in honest communication: in serious meditation and prayer. This is what the Lenten journey is all about.

Lent comes around during the dreary and drab time of year. We had a gray rainy wet day yesterday and we might well have snow tonight. We know spring is coming, but sometimes it's difficult to remember its warmth, its greenness and its promise. We are in a wilderness. This is a good time to begin a Lenten journey and pay some extra attention to our spiritual lives.

Those who are taking part in our Lenten program have heard that one of the macro-stories or themes of the Bible is that of Exile and Return. After the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah in 587 BCE, the Hebrews were taken to Babylon. They were far away from their homeland, their families, the temple which was the center of their faith. In Psalm 137, we hear their pain and sorrow: "By the rivers of Babylon-there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps."⁶

We, too, are in exile when we feel rootless, homeless, disconnected from God, the Ground of our Being, when we are disconnected from our Creator. We long for a route home, but the route home is a journey. It takes work. As with Jesus, the route home may be through a wilderness.

Some of us face the loneliness following the death of a spouse. Many of us are facing economic uncertainty. There is no good news about when we might emerge from the wilderness of financial gloom. But, just like preparing for a backpacking trip, we need to prepare ourselves with the proper food, shelter, cooking equipment, and shoes for the hike. We need to draw together in love, support and compassion. With the Psalmist, we ask God, "teach me your paths." A path becomes easier to follow the more it is used.

God has made a covenant with the Hebrews to sustain and uphold them. God makes that same covenant with us. God will sustain and uphold us, but we must make the effort to follow that path of thinking, questioning, and meditating.

We are not alone. God is good, and God will sustain us. "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust,"⁷

⁶Psalm 137:1-2

⁷Psalm 25:1-2