

## GOD'S WAY OR THE HIGHWAY

Lent 1 Year B

Gen. 9:8-17; Ps. 25:1-10; 1 Pet. 3:18-22; Mk. 1:9-15

Gladstone 18/02/2018

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Grocery shopping can be fun—can't it? You don't agree with me? I love shopping. It's exciting being able to go into that air-conditioned market place and choose all those wonderful foods that you look forward to eating during the coming week—sausages, cheese, fruit and veg—all that cleaning equipment and toilet paper—things no household should be without.

Grocery shopping is one of those things that allow you to express your individuality—to be able to make decisions according to your individual palate—to exercise your freedom of choice over which aisle you go down and what items you decide to purchase. Will it be the pickled cucumbers this week, or the Chicken Tonight sauce with the extra cheese?

When you're grocery shopping, you are lord of your life—the king of consumption—the queen of cuisine.

But no matter how much you may enjoy grocery shopping (or not), there is one part of the shopping experience that can often be (shall we say) less enjoyable. No, I'm not talking here about the kamikaze shopping trolley that has a mind of its own—that insists on crashing into every other trolley as you proceed down the aisle—'Woops, sorry, it's the trolley, you know.' Nor is it that the supermarket is out of your favourite pasta sauce—you know, the one with the Italian herbs and spices. No, what I'm talking about here...is the checkout. Now don't get me wrong. When you get to the checkout you're always presented with a well-groomed person who is very pleasant—who always says a cheery 'Hello' and 'How's your day going?' No. It's *getting* to the checkout that's the problem.

I'm sure you've all been in that situation where you've quickly run into the store just to get a few essentials to tide you over until the next big shop. And there you are with your basket with your bread and milk and the strawberry jam that you forgot last time and a couple of other items. And as you finish choosing what you want and move to the front of the store, you survey the line of checkouts to see which one might offer you the quickest exit from the store.

Now, I've experienced this many times and I've come to the conclusion that it really doesn't matter which checkout you choose, it will always end up being the slowest one—something to do with Murphy's Law, I think. You spy the sign above the checkout that says '8 items or less', and think: Yes! That's the one for me—I've only got six items in my basket. And so you line up, expecting to get through quickly when the ultimate horror occurs. The attendant slowly leans over to the microphone and says those words you never want to hear—'Price check on number 5.'

And for the next ten minutes, you stand there waiting for that elusive price check—losing all hope of a speedy exit—as the lines at all the other checkouts next to you suddenly pick up speed and those people move off into the sunset as you're left stranded behind a 'price check on number 5.' Suddenly the self-serve checkout looks inviting.

As we go through life, we usually like to choose what we would consider to be the quickest path—the path that leads us through life with the least incumbrance—the path that's smooth and stone free—the path that tunnels through the hills rather than going over or around them—the freeway rather than the slow way—the path of least resistance.

But, you know, life isn't like that, is it? Life often takes us places we'd rather not go—places filled with rocks and hedges and gullies that we have to carefully step over or climb around, or beat our way through. And when, at some point, we find that the going *is* smooth and we pick up pace, we end up discovering that we're on the wrong road, or we're lost. (Honey, I think we're lost. Yeh, but we're making great time.) Or, more significantly, up ahead there is a dead end. Like the '8 items or less' checkout isle we find ourselves at a standstill—unable to go forward—and very often, seemingly unable to go back.

It's a little bit like the song that Tevya sings in *Fiddler on the Roof*, as he contemplates what it would be like to be a rich man—to have one long staircase just going up—and one even longer coming down—and one more going nowhere just for show. When faced with the staircases of life, it seems we so often find ourselves on the one that goes nowhere—just for show. Very often, the highway of life becomes a goat track through the scrub.

As we take a look at Psalm 25, this morning—a very fitting place to commence our Lenten journey—we find the psalmist in a similar plight. Life has somehow taken a wrong turn. The smooth path has suddenly turned rocky and difficult. Those whom he thought were friends had become his enemies. Those whom he thought he could trust had lied and turned against him. Surrounded by, what really is, very often, the reality of life—betrayed by friends—deceived by those he thought he knew—there is nowhere to turn—nowhere to go—except to God.

How about you? Have you ever been faced by the harsh reality of life—had to travel difficult roads that sometimes lead to seemingly dead ends? Have you ever been troubled by the disloyalty of those around you? Have you ever shed tears over a friend's betrayal or been so disappointed in others that all you could do was cry out to God as the psalmist did? I am sure that many of you have—you and me both. The good news is that even though we may appear to be at a dead end, heaven is always open to us. And so it is to heaven that the psalmist turns and we also must turn in such times of grief and despondency.

In the midst of betrayal, disappointment and suffering, for what does the psalmist pray? Does he curse his enemies or his own fate? No, he does something else. Looking to heaven, he cries out,

*(NRSV) To you O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God I trust in you:*

*(CEV) <sup>1</sup>I offer you my heart, LORD God, <sup>2</sup>and I trust you.*

Many of us, in times of trouble, look to pass on blame to others and wait (patiently or otherwise) for that time to pass—but not the psalmist. The psalmist does not pray for vengeance—nor does he really even pray for delivery. In the midst of his despair, he puts his trust in God and prays to be shown the right way to go.

*(NRSV) Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.*

*Lead me in your truth and teach me.*

*(CEV) <sup>4</sup>Show me your paths and teach me to follow;*

*<sup>5</sup>guide me by your truth and instruct me.*

The psalmist wants to be led into God's truthfulness and sincerity so that he will keep living within God's faithfulness. In putting his trust in a faithful and true God who would never betray him, he seeks to live with God. The psalmist expresses his faith when he says, "You are the God who saves me."

However, just escaping out of a predicament alone is not salvation. True salvation lies not in just escaping from something, but in being led into God's truth.

The truth for which we pray—the truth that frees us from our despondency—that frees us from our sin—is the truth of the gospel. It's the truth that Peter writes about in his first letter to the exiles of the Dispersion—the church abroad—that we heard this morning, when he says:

*For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. (1 Peter 3:18)*

So, is it the highway you're looking for or God's way?

The real 'paths' in life are not paved highways or express lanes. The real pathways are the paths that God wants us to walk upon—the paths that lead us over all kinds of rugged terrain to the truth of the gospel—the paths that lead to the grace and mercy of God in the forgiveness of our sin.

As we commence our journey through Lent—as we begin to focus on the Passion of Christ, as he, himself, was betrayed and handed over to those who would kill him—let us hold fast to the faithfulness of God and the truth of the gospel—that in Christ we have a Saviour—not a Saviour who takes us out of the world in which we live, but a Saviour that takes us through it—not a Saviour that takes us out of the hands of those who would betray us, but a Saviour who leads us through right pathways—who leads us through the disappointments and trials we encounter throughout our life—who forgives us of our sin and restores us into right relationship with the Father—who constantly gives us the opportunity for a new beginning—a new life through our baptism into Christ.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.