

Today, as we continue this series on Psalm 23, I want you to consider ‘your way and God’s leadership’.

You have heard the old saying that comes across as an affirmation of faith: “God is my co-pilot.”

Well, Psalm 23 tells us that if you think God is your co-pilot, you need to change seats!

Just look at verse 2 and verse 3 in our psalm, particularly that little phrase, “he leads me, he guides me”.

Now I suppose it is obvious that we all need guidance at different times and at different places in our lives, but the fact is we lean toward wanting to make our own way.

I remember an infomercial by a vacation tour operator explaining why you and I would benefit from taking their guided tour of Europe instead of going it alone.

They show a happy couple going on vacation to Europe. They get off the plane in London. They rent their car and immediately they get lost.

They have no clue where they are going, and what starts out as a happy vacation changes pretty quickly, so that soon they are talking to each other in a way they ought not to be talking!

The conclusion is: “You need a guide, you need us to take you on this trip around Europe.”

And if it is true in the secular sense as tourists, then it is surely also true in the spiritual sense for our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

After all, we have only one life to live, and when our life is over, it is over. There is no going back.

It may cost you a lot of money if you blow it as a tourist in Paris or Rome or London or wherever else, but you can go back, and you can try it again.

But with our lives, well, you just have one shot, one time to do it. How important it is to have a guide for this “one life to live”, for the way we are going.

So, we need to ask ourselves constantly if our lives are guided lives or if we are really on our own tour with no guide but ourselves.

God knows full well that if our lives are not to be wasted, if our lives are not to be squandered, then we need guidance in our lives to show us the path ahead: where we are, where we’re going, how to get safely to our destination.

Like the old hymn says, ‘it’s a blessed thought that he leadeth me’, and we can sing “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us” because we know we need his tender care, but it gives rise to the questions: “How does God lead us? What does God’s leadership have to do with the way you go?”

Let me make it easy for you. You can follow Fox News or CNN, but I will tell you that you will receive the best guidance from the BBC: The Bible, Believers, and your Conscience.

First, God guides us through the Bible. But how?

Well, it may be from time to time that God gives us a verse of scripture that we hold on to and is precious to us and that has certainly happened with me.

Now, I know that God may sometimes do that, but not always. There is what I call ‘the flip and dip’ method of finding God’s will from the Bible.

An executive was having financial trouble and so he just opened the Bible at a place and put his finger on a particular page in the Bible; but his finger was not on a passage, but on a chapter title.

In fact, it was chapter 11, which in the financial world refers to bankruptcy. So, he took that to be a ‘word from God,’ guiding him to immediately declare bankruptcy!

But the Bible is not a magic book. God asks us to work hard to find God's guidance, to allow the Bible, all of it, to inform our lives, so that we are not led astray.

In the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 17, we are given the guidance for how God's word should lead us.

It's a word to the King of Israel and all future kings and is a word for us. The first thing God commands a king to do when he sits on the throne is to "write for himself...a copy of the law."

Not to use a secretary, not to assign the task to summer interns, but he is to take out his pen and paper and copy down God's laws for himself.

And he should then return to that copy over and over again, reading it "all the days" of his life.

Joshua DuBois in his book of devotions writes about this passage, "*We must know God's word, for ourselves. We must read it, for ourselves. We must keep it close to us, in a private place, perhaps even copied from our own hands. This writes God's words upon our hearts, where no circumstance can remove it. And it brings us into alignment with his kings.*"

I believe that is how God wants to use the Bible within our lives, not just bit by bit, not just as a collection of proof texts or lines that fit on a bumper sticker but absorbing the fulness of scripture in its depth and breadth in our lives, molding and shaping our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, God leads us, guides us through fellow believers.

That is, if God is going to guide me through the Bible, then I need to have the faith to believe that God is also at work in other people, and through them is able to guide me, to help me check, check and double check my sense of God's will.

God uses other believers, our coming together with others, to show us what God wants us to do.

You see, we get so caught up in going the way of 'what's in it for me?' that we take the path of least resistance.

We've forgotten to ask, 'where am I in it for God and for good' and follow the paths of righteousness.

The question for us as a church is how are we to do this in a pluralistic society? How are we to do this in a society in which we cannot always agree about the form of righteousness in the world?

In this regard, Alistair McIntyre, one of the great ethicists of our generation says this, "*The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterances is that so much of it is used to express disagreements, and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed, is their interminable character.*"

You see, we can no longer exist as a nation or as a church if all that we have going for us is living by the lowest common denominator of "me, myself, and I" and not living up to the highest ideals of morality and integrity and respect for all people.

The problems that beset us are not economical, not even political; they are spiritual in nature.

This is where the promise we make as a congregation in the Sacrament of Baptism is crucial.

You promised today, as you do in every baptism, "to guide and nurture...by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging...to know and follow Jesus Christ."

On behalf of the body of Christ, all believers, you promise to be a guide to help others follow Jesus Christ.

What we're saying is that Tre, that all of us as baptized children of God need someone who has been the way of faith and hope and love before and says, "Pssst! Come on and follow me. I'll show you what to do. I can lead you from where you are to where you want to go."

A guide, that's the church:

- People who have 'been there, done that,' as God's people...caring, helping, serving, teaching, reaching down and helping us up, giving us a shoulder to lean on, arms to wrap around us when we hurt so bad,
- Guided by people who know us, and know the way ahead, faithful people who see the big picture of God and the little picture our spot in in the world and can put all of the picture together with us at a vital place within this picture.
- A church guided by a God who very clearly in scripture is portrayed as a God who loves, who is waiting, who is itching to guide his people, guiding human lives all the way from the beginning, from baptism, to the end.

The church leads us, guides us to discovering afresh the guidance of the God to give meaning and purpose to our lives and to guide us when otherwise we might find ourselves in dead ends again and again and again.

God leads us through the Bible, Believers, and our Consciences!!

So, how does our conscience guide us?

You have heard it said, 'let your conscience be your guide.'

But for so many of us, our conscience has a very bad sense of direction!

We must never forget that our consciences can be easily corrupted, and we can easily misread our consciences.

So how do we connect God's still small voice to the way we are to go?

We need to be informed by the Biblical story of God's way with the world and be in conversations with other believers who know the Biblical story, again and again and again.

The insightful pastoral theologian, Henri Nouwen describes it in terms of discernment.

He says, "*Christian discernment is not the same as decision making. Reaching a decision...maybe we list the pros and cons of each possible choice; and then we choose the action that meets our goal most effectively.*

*Discernment, on the other hand, is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God's desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away.*

*We come to realize that what previously seemed so important for our lives loses its power over us. we move closer to God's heart.*

What we discover is that as we pray more each day, as we study the signposts of God's way in the Bible, as we engage with and involve ourselves with other believers...then God's will, that is, God's powerful, particular, personal ways of loving us and our world, gradually is made known to us.

Your life and mine. Are we our own guides? Or do we live guided lives, guided by God who loves to come to people like you and me to be our guide?

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.