

“Spiritual Headlights: A Light to See By” November 28, 2009

A couple of weeks ago, we were driving home from seeing a performance at Beef and Boards. We were eastbound on 465, when a car came out of nowhere and flew past us. I didn't see the car coming because it didn't have its headlights on, and I don't know how the driver could see where he or she was going. Not only was it hard for the driver to see what lay ahead, but it was also difficult for other drivers to see that there was a car approaching.

Have you ever done that—started out driving when it's dark, and forgotten to turn your lights on? Usually we figure it out rather quickly, when we realize that we can't see the road. Turning on the lights makes a vast difference in our ability to drive effectively, and to make our way along the desired route.

It seems to me that much the same things is true when it comes to needing some sort of light to see by when it comes to living our lives, and especially, now that we are headed down the road toward Christmas. As hard as it is to believe, Christmas is just a few weeks away, and my guess is that this Christmas will be far different for many of us from past years.

For sure, the economic climate has affected many people, who've lost jobs that won't come back. Companies struggle to stay afloat, but all that can seem minor at times compared to what's going on in our own personal lives. Perhaps this Christmas is one where a loved one will not be present for the first time, and that can alter our thinking and planning. Maybe our health, or that of someone close to us is more precarious than in the past, and so our consideration of Christmas is different. I would guess most of us know someone—a family member or friend, who's suffering from depression and discouragement, having trouble finding a shred of hope to hold onto. Maybe we just can't quite get in the Christmas spirit because someone special to us is serving overseas, and won't be with us at Christmas.

It's not always the tough things that make the season different. Sometimes it's just the changes, even the good ones, that alter how we celebrate Christmas. The marriage of a son or daughter can change when and how we celebrate, and in our family, we're trying to adjust to the reality of having a new grandbaby, and what that means for long-held traditions. In

one way or another, things are probably up in the air for many of us this Christmas.

When things seem unclear and uncertain, how do we find our way? What is it that can lead us through this time and toward a brighter day? How do we go forward when it seems like we're driving on a dark night without our headlights on? Clearly, we need a light to see by, some sort of guidance to help us on the way. Where do we find that light?

Maybe our Bible passage can be helpful. Now we just have one verse from Psalm 119, but if we were to read all 176 verses of that psalm, we might find some sentiments similar to the ones expressed earlier. The writer appears to be struggling to make his way through this thing we call life, and is trying to search for some direction, some guidance. Finally, in verse 105—the verse we have, we read some indication of where the psalmist thinks he can find direction. I have two versions of the verse, and they read like this:

“Your word is a lamp to guide me and a light for my path.” (TEV)

“By your words I can see where I am going; they throw a beam of light on my dark path.” (The Message)

As I understand it, the writer believes that God is the one who can guide and direct us. If we are somehow attuned to and connected with God, we can find the direction we need, or as the psalmist put it: “a lamp to guide us and a light for our path.” God can be like our spiritual headlights lighting the way. All we need is to turn the lights on and follow. What's the best way to do that?

It seems to me that we're practicing one way right this very minute, and that's by gathering together with the desire and intent to connect with God, be inspired by God, and discern how God would have us live. That's supposed to be the primary purpose of the entity we call the church. I'm not sure we always fulfill that purpose as we should, but ideally, that's why we gather and what we're to be about.

Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies*, writes about the importance of her church in her life, and why she insists that her son be a part of it, even though he's quite resistant. She says this, “The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by.”

She goes on to say that most of the people who have what she desires to have in her life—purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people who have a deep sense of

spirituality Furthermore, they are people who gather together to pray and practice their faith—regardless of the path they have chosen. She continues by saying, “They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.” *In her own way, Anne Lamott is expressing the same thing as the psalmist. So yes, one of the ways we connect with God is by gathering together and trying to allow ourselves to be attuned to how God would lead us. We’re seeking God’s guidance.

But obviously, we aren’t going to be together every moment of every day, not even between now and Christmas, so something else is needed. I certainly believe a piece of what is needed is prayer—conversation with God. We’ve talked about the importance of prayer before, and I see it as just as vital as the conversations we have with the people we love and care about. We share, and we listen; we pay attention, and we look for direction.

You know, there is not set way to pray. Whatever works for me is probably different from what works for you. Some need to find a quiet place away from everyone and everything else, and focus total attention on what God is trying to tell us. I know someone who always prays when she’s driving. That’s just her time, and she literally carries on a conversation with God.

More and more, I’ve come to believe that every thought we have is a prayer to God. When we think of someone, we’re in essence saying a prayer for that person. When we ponder a dilemma or complex situation, we’re opening ourselves for God’s revelation or new approach or novel idea for resolving the situation. I really believe that’s the kind of thing Paul was thinking about when he urged us to “pray without ceasing.” That’s one of my ways to pray, but formally or informally, however we understand it, in whatever words, in whatever place, it’s vitally important that we allow space in our lives to pray to God, and open ourselves for God’s leading. That’s another way to make sure our spiritual headlights are on.

I also believe that God guides us through an inner moral compass that most of us seem to have. Within us there is a sense of what is right and wrong, what is loving and what is not loving. This becomes clearly evident when we go through the spiritual statement experience that Bob Blake has created for us. Very early in the process, we do an exercise developed by Marc Hauser, a Harvard professor. Three different scenarios are

presented, and those in the workshop are asked to decide on whether the answer to the scenario is morally “obligated,” “Permissible,” or “forbidden.” Amazingly, one of the results of this exercise is the revelation that 90% or more of the respondents, coming from around the world with different religious and cultural backgrounds, including those who don’t identify with any religion, agree on the outcome.

This suggests that human beings have an innate moral sense. One of the points that Bob makes is that The Garden thinks that people have a sense of right and wrong, and also an understanding of why they are here and what they want their living to mean. That leads me to conclude that we have an inner moral sense that can guide us well, if we honor it. It’s a kind of spiritual headlight.

Allowing God to guide us means that we have to be open to seeing and hearing where God is leading, and then it means we have to be willing to follow. I recently read something an unknown writer put together when meditating on the word “Guidance.” The writer said that in reflecting on the word, it was seeing “dance” at the end of it that caught the most attention. That realization led to remembering that doing God’s will, following God’s lead, seeking God’s guidance, is a lot like dancing.

Think about dancing. When two people try to lead, nothing works quite right, and the movement doesn’t flow with the music. Once a body realizes that, and allows the other to lead, both begin to flow with the music; all it takes is a gentle cue, a slight nudge, a quiet directing. A dance requires willingness and attentiveness from one person and gentle guidance and skill from the other.

Furthermore, the writer observed, the word “guidance” can lead to other thoughts. The “G” represents God, and that’s followed by “u” and “I.” ‘God,’ ‘u,’ ‘I,’ dance.’—God, you, and I dance. Guidance is the gift that we have of dancing with God, and allowing God to lead us. When we’re searching for direction, dancing with God may just be the spiritual headlight we need the most.

Closing:

Even though she was talking about the ability to write, Anne Lamott’s use of a quote by E.L. Doctorow, author of *Ragtime*, can help us when it comes to letting God guide us. He said, “Writing is like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.”

Whether we're talking about getting ready for Christmas or the bigger picture of living our lives in a positive way, we need spiritual headlights. Even though we can only see as far as the lights will shine, that's enough for us to make the entire journey. We can trust God to lead the way, and we'll have the courage to dance with God.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.