All of this is a preamble to our look at Psalm 25, where the psalmist prays, “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.” In effect, the psalmist is asking God to help him with a sense of spiritual direction and a cognitive map that shows him the Lord’s ways and paths. Or to use a modern metaphor, the psalmist is praying for a spiritual GPS.

That is an especially apropos prayer for this season of Lent. Traveling God’s path implies movement and direction, a response to God’s word, and a way of living that pleases God. In the Psalms, “path” often refers to the kind of conduct prescribed by the Scripture, especially in the laws of Moses. The first five books of the Bible are called the Torah, which means “instruction.” When he prays, “Make known to me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth…” the psalmist is asking for instruction in traveling God’s way.

Psalm 25 tells us specific things about the path to God. First, it tells us that the godly path is not necessarily a way that we know intuitively. When the psalmist prays, in verse 4, “Make me to know your ways… teach me your paths,” he acknowledges that the path of the Lord is not necessarily obvious, but rather a direction that needs to be studied out, discerned, and discovered. Sometimes, we learn about God’s path when we walk too far on another trail and discover that it leads us into trouble. Beating a hasty retreat, we call out to God for some direction, and we encounter Jesus.

Then, the psalmist acknowledges that “God…instructs sinners in the way” (v. 8). The writer is speaking of the instruction provided by a loving God so that God’s human creatures can find the right direction in this confusing world. Finally, the psalmist acknowledges that all the ways of God are characterized by steadfast love and faithfulness for those who follow God’s instruction (v. 10). The psalmist is sure that the way of the Lord is a good way, which is why he opens by praying, “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul” (v. 1). Clearly the psalmist knew where the right path started!

In his book about inner navigation, Jonsson touts the advantages of the cognitive map, noting that it “is tailor made for us, showing only what we need to see.” In contrast, “a street map,” says Jonsson, “shows mostly what we don’t need, and it takes quite a bit of practice in map reading to use it efficiently, to get past the wealth of useless information and find what one actually needs.”

Street maps and general knowledge have their place, of course, and we draw from our general knowledge in living our lives every day. But the way of the Lord is a special application of knowledge guided by the Holy Spirit. Thus, we need God’s help to develop our cognitive sense and orienteer on God’s path.

So how do we do that? Here are three ways: **First, make it a matter of prayer.** “To pray is to change,” says Richard Foster, “Prayer is the central avenue God uses to change us.” In so saying, Foster answers the question about why we should pray when God already knows our needs. We should pray because God uses prayer to change us. In fact, Foster says: “If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives.” In Psalm 25, the psalmist even gives us some words to use in these prayers: “Make known to me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth…”

If you find praying difficult, and a great many of us do, you might try this during Lent: Spend some time reading and praying the prayers others have written. You might use A Diary of Private Prayer by John Baillie, a little book which contains two prayers a day, one for morning and one for evening, for 31 days. Our I would suggest Timothy Keller’s daily devotions on the Psalms (*The Songs of Jesus*) or Proverbs (*God’s Wisdom for Navigating Life*). There are prayer apps for your phone and millions of websites offering to send prayers to your email inbox. If your prayer-life feels stuck in a rut, find a new path by using one of these “helps.”

**Second, make your quest for a spiritual cognitive map a matter of Scripture reading.** During Lent, select a passage each day (no more than 10-12 verses) from the gospels, epistles, or psalms. Read it, not focusing on what the passage meant to the original audience, but what God might say through it to you. As you read, notice if a word, phrase, or verse speaks to you or to some aspect of your life right now. If so, pause and savor the insight, or feeling, and acknowledge that what you noticed is likely a landmark on your spiritual journey, something that will help you find the Lord’s way into the future. Then go back and read the passage again because it will have a fuller meaning. Pause again and note what happened. Follow with prayer. This exercise will help your spiritual way-finding skills, as one of the psalms tells us: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

**Third, consider how fasting might help you in your spiritual orienteering.** Fasting is a common spiritual practice during Lent. Find the level of fasting that works best for you. You can go without all food (just remember to hydrate) for a set period or you can do a partial fast, omitting just a single meal one day a week, with many other possibilities in between. Whatever level you choose, the point is to consider how the fast helps you focus on matters that you might not have focused on otherwise…to help you hear things from God you might not have otherwise heard.

If you want to improve your ability to find your way on the streets and highways these days, you do not have to wear a magnetic hat. Wearable devices like GPS smart watches can provide a tactile feeling to notify you about directions, and newer navigation technology is always right around the corner. But for finding the Lord’s path, there is no device to replicate what prayer, Bible-reading, and fasting can do to steer you into the Lord’s pathways.

Prayer: God of Eternal Love, we have made our commitment to you, and have started a new journey into purposeful growth. But we know that to remain faithful, we need your help and your strength. So, we ask: Teach us to pray with faith and read your word with understanding. Teach us to worship with passion and gather with love. Teach us to give generously, serve compassionately and use our time mindfully, so that we may reflect your goodness, and that others may discover your grace through us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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**Inner Navigation and the Lord’s Way**

Sunday, February 21, 2021 Psalm 25:1-10

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Neuroscientist Sue Barry wore a hat with a magnet in it every time she went out. She was not trying to attract stray bits of metal or deflect impulses from UFOs. She was hoping it would help her improve her sense of direction, which had always been poor. Barry’s husband, who is also a scientist, rigged up the magnetic hat and set it so that it buzzed every time she turned north. After wearing the hat around town, she began to anticipate not just which way north was, but also “how things connect,” she says.

Barry eventually swapped her buzzing magnetic hat for a smartphone app, also developed by her husband, that vibrates when facing north. Barry says it was worth the effort. She began associating certain streets and landmarks with north due to the cues from the hat and the phone, and from there she could make connections about which streets were parallel and which ones intersected. Her direction-finding skills improved, disproving the notion that if one’s sense of direction is not well-developed, there is nothing one can do about it.

Still, some people seem better at finding their way than others. All of us form “cognitive maps” to the locations we visit frequently, which helps us find our way around our house. But some people form “cognitive maps” even for places they visited only once. If they ever go back there, they can navigate easily and have an inner sense of where things are in relation to other things. For example, “McDonald’s is here, so the library is to the left, and the street beside that should take me back to the highway.”

In his book about direction finding, titled Inner Navigation, Erik Jonsson says, “Our natural curiosity, the interest with which we look at new things, especially those that stand out as landmarks, is enough to create the cognitive map without any conscious effort.” He intimates that the level of our curiosity about some features of the natural landscape may determine the quality of our cognitive maps.