

The Paths of the Lord

Psalm 25:1-10

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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The theme coming out of our Advent worship resources this year is “Dare to Imagine.”

Each week we will be invited to “dare to imagine” various aspects of God’s character and promise for our world as we anticipate Christ’s coming to us once again.

This week, we dare to imagine God’s goodness.

I don’t know how carefully you pay attention to the texts and themes that accompany the Sundays of Advent each year, but typically the First Sunday of Advent is one where God’s goodness is a bit muted.

The gospel text is always one of some foreboding, urging watchfulness, warning of the judgment that is to come at the Second Advent, when Christ comes again.

The goodness of God is implicit—the one who comes to judge is full of grace and truth.

But the imagery of the texts on the First Sunday of Advent is a bit severe and jarring. It is meant to be.

It is meant to shock us out of complacency and to remind us that Advent isn’t a Hallmark-y prelude to Christmas, but a season of watching and waiting and realigning our lives with God’s vision for the world.

I’ve preached on some of these themes during past Advents. I think they are important.

But this year, at the outset of our second pandemic Advent, with all the badness that dominates our headlines everyday, with all of the anxiety and uncertainty that continues to cloud our collective consciousness, I wanted to preach about goodness.

I don't think I've ever preached on the chosen Psalm on the first Sunday of Advent, but I will today, because Psalm 25 is all about the goodness of God.

But before we get to the Psalm, what do we even mean when we use words like “goodness” or “good?”

“Good” is one of many words in the English language that suffers from overuse and careless use.

“How are you,” we often ask one another, barely expecting an honest response, assuming that the one lonely syllable coming back in our direction will be predictable enough: “good.”

“Good” is not “bad,” but it's not “great” either. It's a word that we often use to say just enough to not say much at all, just enough to not have to say much more.

We sprinkle the word “good” throughout our everyday discourse. Good luck. Good for you. Good-bye (which used to be “God be with you”). Good times. Good to go. Good old days.

Each one of these expresses something vaguely positive, but also a little bland, a little imprecise, a little squishy and hard to pin down.

Despite our overuse and misuse and casual use of the word “good,” if we drill down into the word, it expresses something that we all crave, even if we struggle to define it.

The Hebrew word that is translated “good” in Psalm 25 has a range of meanings.

Faithfulness, kindness, righteousness, excellence. Something that is fit for a particular task or purpose. It's all bound up in that one word: good.

Goodness, we believe, is what we and our world were made for.

In the beginning, God created a world and called it good. He created human beings, and called them/us *very* good—“wonders,” as we said earlier in our call to worship.

And goodness expresses something that we believe (or want to believe) about the very nature of God, God's disposition toward us and the world, and the future God has promised.

Sometimes this is easier than others.

I've been reading Philip Yancey's memoir *Where the Light Fell*. Yancey's writings were important for me in my early twenties. He was one of few evangelical writers that I had encountered who seemed to feel free to ask hard questions about faith and doubt, about the problem of unjust suffering, about the mystery of prayer, and many other things.

I devoured books like *What's So Amazing About Grace*, and *Disappointment with God*, and *What Good is God?*, and *Soul Survivor*.

Yancey didn't just recite religious platitudes. He was honest about the life of faith. I liked that. I like it still.

But as his memoir makes clear, Yancey's journey has not been an easy one. Like many in that time, and particularly many in the American south, Yancey grew up in a very severe religious environment.

Almost everyone around him, including other Christians, was suspicious because they didn't believe precisely what Yancey's mother and church believed.

Church was a dour place full of angry, judgmental, and racist rhetoric. Family life was more of the same.

Yancey described his earlier self as "resentful, wound tight with anger, a single, hardened link in a long chain of ungrace learned from family and church."

Yancey recently reflected on the movement of his faith in an interview with *The Atlantic*:

As I look back, the greatest deception was just the representation of God that I had. Of this angry bully in the sky who's just trying to smash people who seem to be having a good time. And it's a caricature, but I'm not the only one [who held it]. A lot of kids raised in that fear and shame environment come away with that image of God. So my faith was suspended...

The title of Yancey's book, *Where the Light Fell*, is taken from a quote from St. Augustine, who said, "I couldn't look at the sun directly, but I could look at where the light fell."

For Yancey, the light fell in three areas: nature, classical music, and romantic love, in the person of his wife, Janet.

"I had gone through this period of creating a shell to keep the church from getting to me, to keep my mother from getting to me, and it started to crack apart because it softened, as shells do, when I experienced those three things," Yancey told me.

“I realized that my image of God could not be true if these things were products of that God.¹

It was goodness that brought Yancey to a truer vision of God and a more inhabitable faith. His background and various experiences had made it difficult to look directly at the “sun.” His image of God had too much clutter and distortion.

So, he looked where the light fell. And he was drawn to a deeper and truer and better vision of God.

I don’t know how your experience fits or doesn’t fit with that of Philip Yancey’s. I do know that many, *many* people walk around every day with distorted and psychologically damaging views of God in their head.

God always demands more. More faith, more giving, more activism, more and better moral performance, less naughty behaviours and more nice ones.

We believe that God is keeping score, like Santa, and is only willing to dole out goodies if we’ve been good enough.

Even people who say all the right things about the love of God, the grace of God, the mercy of God still struggle, at times, to believe in the fundamental goodness of God.

We cannot hear it often enough. God is good.

God’s disposition towards his children is good. Goodness defines God’s character. God’s dream for our lives and for our world is good.

David knew this. It is anchor of his prayer in Psalm 25.

I trust you. Show me your ways. Teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth. Don’t remember all the bad things I’ve done.

According to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O Lord!

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/interview-philip-yancey/620789/>

David knows that the goodness of God is deep and wide and strong and true. This is the foundation of all his hope.

The goodness of God stands over all of David's sin, all of his fear, all of his uncertainty and shame, all of his longing.

The goodness of God is the basic fact of David's life.

During Advent, we dare to imagine the goodness of God.

We dare to imagine a God who is for his people, who comes—incredibly—to take on human flesh, human experience, and ultimately human sin.

We dare to imagine a God who sets before us a vision of peace on earth, and good will to all people.

We dare to imagine a God who scandalously offers love and forgiveness and mercy to all, even (or especially) those who do not deserve it.

This is the God for whom we are waiting. This is the hope and the longing that we rehearse each year at this time.

The title of my sermon this morning is taken from Psalm 25:10. I've said before that I sometimes struggle to come up with titles for my sermons, so I'll often grab on to a portion of the passage I'm preaching on that grabs me in some unique way.

Psalm 25:10:

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness...

I believe that this is true. It is true of the big story we are all part of. It is true of the smaller stories of our lives.

This doesn't mean that all the paths of the Lord are easy. God sometimes leads us down roads we would never choose, roads that are demanding and difficult, roads that might even seem to break us.

But I do believe that God's steadfast love and faithfulness never leave us. There is no path, no matter how bleak, that you or I will ever wander down where God's love does not go before us, behind us, and around us.

Sometimes we can only see this with the benefit of hindsight. Sometimes it requires great faith and perseverance and patient determination to believe this.

Sometimes we struggle to look where the light falls because there doesn't seem to be much light.

But one of my deepest convictions is that God does not leave us alone.

During the season of Advent, we direct our gaze in two directions.

We look back to Christ's first Advent, when God's path to us involved coming to be one of us.

We also look ahead to when God's path will once again lead to us, when Christ will come again.

As Christians, we believe and gladly proclaim that all God's paths are steadfast love and faithfulness."

We believe and gladly proclaim that God's path to us is Jesus.

Jesus is the face of God's goodness. Jesus is the mercy of God directed toward us.

At the end of the article on Philip Yancey that I referenced earlier, the interviewer asked him what he hoped his legacy might be.

"If I, in some way, nudge the church back toward grace, that's what I would feel best about... I think that's why we're here."

I may or may not have audibly said "amen" when I read that line.

And to that nudge of the church toward grace, I would add a firm shove toward a deeper and truer and more settled understanding of the goodness of God.

We know that God is good. We need only look at Jesus.

May God help us to look where the light falls this Advent season. May God help us to train our vision upon Jesus.

Amen.

