

***“Be Born in Us Today Bringing Guidance”***

Let me begin with a story a pastor told:

I was lost once in the deep woods of the Cascade Mountains in Oregon. I had driven up on my own and was looking forward to cutting a noble fir for our family Christmas tree. I stopped to pick up a permit at the ranger’s office and drove to the area designated for cutting trees. A couple of pickups had already pulled over and were parked at the mileage marker on the side of the road. Into the woods I went with my saw and rope in hand.

You should know that I am not a mountaineering person. It was afternoon as I entered the woods alone in search of the perfect Christmas tree. I had too late a start and I went in solo. The tree eluded me for hours as a gentle snow began to fall, covering my tracks. As the sun began to set with no tree in tow, I suddenly realized as I turned around that I was not sure which way to go to get back to my car. Two trails appeared before me, neither revealing any clear tracks because of the snow.

In this Robert Frost moment (“two roads diverged in a yellow wood”), I sat on a log and pondered which trail to take. I remember praying for guidance. Then it was still for a few moments until I heard a rustling and footsteps. “A bear!” I thought, “Great! This ends with a bear encounter!” I turned, trembling. To my utter surprise, coming from behind me was, not a bear, but Jerry, a member of our church, pulling a freshly cut noble fir behind him. He was the owner of one of those pickups I had seen on the road. I knew him, and he recognized me right away. “You’re lost,” he said, calling my name. “Totally,” I admitted. Jerry knew these woods like the back of his hand, and he knew me. He put his hand on my shoulder and said simply, “Follow me.” I did. He guided me out of the woods. The next morning there was a noble fir Christmas tree on our front porch.

In the words of Psalm 31:3, Jerry was “a rock and fortress” for me that day. I trusted him to “lead and guide me” to safety because I knew him well, and I had complete confidence that he knew those woods. Yet both

Jerry and I were very much aware that night that God was the one busy all day orchestrating my safe arrival home despite my greenhorn mistakes in the woods. It turns out God is very good at leading and guiding.

Now that you have heard that story, let's look to Scripture for further direction. Psalm 31 is a prayer for guidance accredited to David, former shepherd, king, and songwriter. We may forget that the book of Psalms is actually a collection of songs to be sung by God's people. An old proverb (I was always taught it came from Sweden) says, *"To sing is to pray twice."* To know that these words were first sung enhances their intensity.

A possible setting for this psalm is a conspiracy to overthrow and assassinate King David that was being led by his son Absalom. Just reading through the first five verses of the psalm, you can catch the urgency of David's situation. He begins with a prayer for deliverance and rescue, asking God to be his rock and fortress. Then, still in prayer, he confesses that this is exactly what God is for him, a rock and fortress. He has complete trust that God will lead and guide him out of this situation.

Note that David asks God to lead and guide him *"for your name's sake."* David can expect this from God because this is what God does: leads and guides. It is God being true to who God is—*"for your name's sake."* We must not miss here the tie between prayer and trust. David was confident in prayer because he trusted in the Lord. He knew the Lord, and the Lord knew him. They had a track record together, and David had learned that the name of the Lord could be trusted.

*"You have redeemed me,"* he prays in v. 5, *"O Lord, faithful God."* In the same verse, David gives us a beautiful prayer of trust: *"Into your hands I commit my spirit."* These words would become a cherished prayer spoken for centuries by Jewish children at bedtime. The prayer's significance would be even more enhanced when Jesus spoke the prayer from the cross just before he died: *"Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit"* (Luke 23:46). Our Lord on the cross fell asleep in his Father's arms, trusting that he was safe.

The story of Advent is a story of God leading and guiding. From a fallen Eden where God promised one who would crush the serpent's head to Abraham, called by God to lead a chosen nation; from the redeeming exodus of God's enslaved people to the return of God's people from exile in Babylon; from the prophets to the songwriters, from God choosing Mary to give birth to the world's Savior to John the Baptist preparing his way; from Bethlehem to Nazareth to Capernaum to Jerusalem and back to the Father's side; from the teaching to the healing, from the dying to the rising; from the apostles and martyrs to the church today; through it all, through every twist in the plot of our sacred story, God has been leading and guiding for God's name's sake.

We know the Lord. We trust in the Lord to lead and guide us because of this amazing rescue history, this great sacred story arching over all of human history. We trust the Lord, too, because in our own stories we have experienced his leading and guiding. There are times for us, like David's, when we are threatened or lost or uncertain, struggling to decide which way to go.

It's like sitting lost in a darkening forest and hearing rustling behind us. We can think the worst. We can be like children crying in the night. Then, because we know the Lord, there comes this prayer, David's prayer, as paraphrased in *The Message*: "*You're my cave to hide in, my cliff to climb. Be my safe leader, be my true mountain guide. Free me from hidden traps; I want to hide in you. I've put my life in your hands. You won't drop me, you'll never let me down*" (Psalm 31:3-5).

Many of you know the name of the poet Christina Rossetti. She may be best known as the poet who wrote the lyrics for the Christmas carol "In the Bleak Midwinter." Writing in the mid-19th century, her children's poetry and her religious verse are still read and cherished today.

A little known poem by Rossetti is titled "Up-Hill" and presents a dialogue between a trekker ascending toward an inn and a voice encouraging her along the way. The poem is structured very simply: the uphill traveler asks questions and the encouraging voice responds. For

Christians, it is easy to identify that voice as the voice of God, affirming the promises of safety and rest. Listen.

Does the road wind up-hill all the way? *Yes, to the very end.*

Will the day's journey take the whole long day? *From morn to night, my friend.*

But is there for the night a resting-place? A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.

May not the darkness hide it from my face? *You cannot miss that inn.*

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night? Those who have gone before. Then must I knock, or call when just in sight? *They will not keep you standing at that door.*

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak? *Of labour you shall find the sum.*

Will there be beds for me and all who seek? *Yea, beds for all who come.*

*(Christina Rossetti, "Up-Hill," Goblin Market and Other Poems, Macmillan, 1862)*

Isn't it great to know that in all of the uphill treks of our lives, God is with us to lead and to guide. It helps to know, too, that others have gone the up-hill journey before us, and have heard the voice of God in the Scriptures or in the encouraging words of a friend. There is and will be, just as promised in this psalm, a rock, a fortress, or in Rossetti's words: "*But is there for the night a resting-place? A roof for when the slow dark hours begin. May not the darkness hide it from my face? You cannot miss that inn.*"

Such trust, such confidence we have in God because Jesus made the uphill climb from the manger to the cross and there found rest with his Father in his dying breath. This uphill trekker has proven that God will lead and guide and get us home safely. And so, as Christmas nears, we pray, "*Lord Christ, be born in us today. Amen.*"