

**“Guiding Us through the Trenches of Life” [Full text version with optional edits]  
Psalm 119:97-105; John 8:12  
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: July 12, 2009  
A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2009, Ivan Peden  
MUMC, Thomasville, NC**

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When we lived in High Point, Helen Covington and I became good friends. She died three years ago. Among other things, Helen and I shared an interest in turtles, Loggerhead Turtles in particular. I have a collection of turtles – furry, fuzzy, plastic, clay, crystal, wooden turtles – in boxes in the parsonage. In my opinion turtles are special earth-friends who have so much to teach us. So allow me to indulge today (and next week, I might add) in a little “turtle theology!”

Let me take you back with me to where this whole turtle obsession began. I regard what happened at Holden Beach in 1998 as a truly spiritual experience. It became a parable of life: a lesson about God’s created order ...about the miracle of nature ...about the opportunities and challenges of life. In a symbolic way there is a lesson in this story. It’s about being guided by God through the trenches of life.

While on vacation with two teenage children we found ourselves caught up in the excitement of the hatching of baby Loggerhead Turtles on Holden Beach. Turtle Patrol workers had dug a trench in the sand from a turtle nest near the dunes down to the water’s edge. Excited volunteers – many children and some excited adults like myself – were guiding the newly hatched turtles the full length of the trench with flashlights. We did this by beaming light from a flashlight in the trench just six inches in front of each turtle’s little head. You probably know that newly hatched turtles instinctively move towards the glistening, moonlit ocean water.

As the turtles moved forward, we moved too, keeping the light beaming in front of them. When they reached the water’s edge they were gently picked up and held safely in a container until all reached this goal. The container full of wriggling, lively turtles was then carried by a volunteer – on one occasion by our son, Luke – to a point beyond the breakers where the turtles were then released into the wide open ocean.

Whenever I think about that experience I find myself recognizing a number of connecting points between what was happening to the turtles on the beach and what happens to us as our Christian experience and biblical faith are formed. I will try my best to articulate some of these connections between my observations of the animal kingdom and God's kingdom.

My text for today is the well-known verse from Psalm 119, verse 105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path," has always been one of my favorite scriptures. It is a verse that conveys the psalmist's assurance of God's continuing guidance throughout our lives, especially the guidance we draw from hearing, knowing, and obeying the word of God. The written word of God that we have in our Bibles always points beyond itself to the living Word ...to Christ who has promised to be with us always, and to the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to be our Guide, our Advocate, our Comforter, and our Teacher.

CAN OMIT        *[Beyond the sacred page  
I seek Thee, Lord;  
My spirit pants for Thee,  
O Living Word.]*

My counseling experience as a pastor leads me to believe that there are many people – some very devout Christ followers – who need to be assured of God's guidance when facing some of the opportunities, challenges and transitions of life. As I share my thoughts about being guided by God through the trenches of life, I hope you will be encouraged.

The first is this: We need to **keep moving forward**. The psalmist's depiction of life is dynamic, not static. He uses an ambulatory picture: feet walking along a path ... "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Life involves moving ahead, traveling along, looking toward a goal in sight. Life is never stagnant, never stationary. We are pilgrims along the way and we need light for the journey ...we need God's guidance ...especially when we have to make our way along the trenches of life from

nests of comfort and security to great oceans of opportunity and challenge. Guidance comes when we keep moving forward in faith, not when we sit in doubt.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet.” The “word,” of course, in the psalmist’s context was the Torah, the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament Law, summarized for convenience in the oral tradition of the Hebrew people as the Ten Commandments. It was a lamp given to the Hebrew people when they were people-on-the-move ... wandering in the wilderness ... searching for the Promised Land. [GO TO \*]

CAN OMIT [You will recall how God guided them through the biggest trench in history when the waters of the Red Sea parted, making possible a miraculous deliverance from their enemies. It was on the other side of this event as they reached Mount Sinai that they received this lamp, the Ten Commandments, a light from God to guide the life, the worship, and the behavior of Israel.]

\*God expected the Hebrew people to keep moving towards the Promised Land with the light they had received at Sinai, but also to move out carrying this light to others. [GO TO \*\*]

CAN OMIT [Later, through the prophets, Yahweh declared that the light from this lamp was to be shared with other nations ...that Israel was to be “a light to the Gentiles.”]

\*\*God expects the same of us. “Keep moving forward,” God is saying to you and to me today. “Where my guidance is to be found, there is always more to be expected and more to do, and there are others who need my guidance, too. Keep on the move. I help those who help themselves.” We are sometimes tempted to make that place where we receive God’s guidance a comfort zone. We find ourselves wanting to say: “This is it. This is all I need. This is all God expects.” Little do we know that when we think and talk this way we are in spiritual danger rather than in a spiritual comfort zone.

Let’s remind ourselves that Christian discipleship is dynamic: it keeps challenging us to move forward, to stay in step with God, to keep up with the plans and purposes that God has for each of our lives and for the life of this church. As soon as

we stop for too long in the trenches of life we run the risk of not realizing our full potential. Just as the little turtles have to make their way from their nest, which for the incubation period had become their comfort zone, and keep moving ahead until they reach the water, so we have to keep moving forward to realize all that God has in store for us in life's ocean of opportunities and challenges.

Second, we need to **keep on looking for God's guidance in our lives**. I imagine that those who first heard the psalmist's words - devout Jews in Old Testament times - would turn again and again to the scriptures. They would keep on looking for the light of God's word that would illuminate their paths ...that would cast God's light of guidance and providence before them ...that would direct their feet in the way they should walk.

CAN OMIT [I imagine these Jews seeking out their religious leaders – rabbis, teachers, priests – to counsel with them and to have them interpret God's word to them as they found themselves in the trenches of life, looking to be led in their paths by the light from the lamp of God's word.]

They were no different from us. They wanted light for the path ahead. They needed guidance to keep moving forward, and they kept looking for it. They wanted to face the opportunities and challenges of life in the light of God's word and will for them. When we constantly look for God's guidance we are exercising our faith in God; we are expressing our belief in a God who is involved in our lives in a personal way. God is infinitely concerned about you and your situation. God knows you. God loves you more than you could ever imagine. God wants the best for you. And God has promised to be with us.

Let us never give in to despair. Let us never give up to defeat. Let us **keep on looking** for God's guidance ...***not*** when all else fails and we are desperate, but in everyday, down-to-earth decisions that must be made, opportunities that must be seized, and challenges that must be faced.

In the Gospel reading today, John 8:12, Christ, the Light of the world, promises **no darkness**. Recall Jesus' words: *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.* If we walk in the light of God's word ...with the guidance that God provides ...having the light of life that Jesus promised ... we will **never** walk in darkness. When storm clouds gather ...when life deals us the worst hand imaginable ...even when the valley of the shadow of death looms before us ...or when the darkness of defeat and despair seek to devour us ...we will keep looking for the light of God's guidance. Darkness will never imprison us because Christ, the Light of the world, will lead us out of darkness and set our feet upon the lighted path again.

CAN OMIT [As we keep on looking for God's guidance, we ought to be alert to the many methods God uses to light our way ahead. I have referred to God's word – the written word, and to Christ – the living Word – and to the Holy Spirit – our Guide and Helper – but there are also other methods such as: circumstances when doors of opportunity and challenge open or close for us; conscience – our inner guide; and plain old commonsense.

This list lacks one more method which the apostle John hints at in 1 John 1:7: *If we walk in the light, as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.* Let us be alert to the light that often shines upon our way as we relate to trusted fellow Christians and family members ...with the emphasis on the word "trusted." As we keep looking for guidance, we do well to pay attention to people around us who care about us ...people whom God may use to light our way. God's guiding light is often to be discerned in community with other Christians. Never was our progress through the trenches of life intended to be a solitary experience.]

To recap, then: First, we need to keep moving forward ...Second, we need to keep on looking for God's guidance – **MUST OMIT, IF FORMER OMITTED** [always keeping an open mind to *the many different methods* God uses to guide us, including other people.

Third, we need to **keep on expecting and depending on step-by-step guidance from God**. “Your word is a lamp to my feet.” We can hear the psalmist singing these words. Perhaps it was a favorite hymn at the shrines and in the synagogues. Maybe as evening fell there were those who begged, “May we sing the ‘lamp’ song,” and holding their oil lamps to light the way, the caravan of pilgrims gently started singing this beloved hymn: *Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. [Have organ play brief introduction and then lead congregation singing softly – refrain ONLY.]* Slowly the pilgrims journeyed towards Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover, and the rhythmic song swelled out: *[Have organist play a chord and then sing refrain again louder, repeating it twice]: ... Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.*

We do well to remember that the lamp in Old Testament times looked like a flattened teapot. It carried one small wick which could flutter in the breeze, and its light fell only one step ahead in the darkness. As the pilgrim took one step forward, so the light moved that much forward with the person. Not unlike the light beam from the flashlight of the Turtle Patrol volunteers as we shone the light six inches in front of each turtle. We saw to it that the light kept moving just far enough ahead for the turtle to see. And if the turtle stopped to rest, the light lingered just ahead for the turtle to make progress.

Let me give you one more illustration ... This light of God, this guidance that we all seek, in the trenches of life is like driving a car at night. The headlights only shine so far. We cannot see ahead to the next curve, but when we get there, the headlights show the way. Correct? In most situations the Lord does not throw light very far ahead, and that can be frustrating. But if God gave us the whole picture all at once, it would be too easy for us to take off on our own and get ahead of God. Instead, God’s guidance is usually step-by-step. It is the exception rather than the rule to see so far ahead that we can take giant leaps instead of small steps. Keep expecting step-by-step guidance. Depend on step-by-step guidance from God. That way, God knows we will keep

checking to see that we are moving in step with God's will: a sure safeguard to impulsively blundering into fences or from taking the wrong paths.

I don't know what opportunities, challenges, or transitions you face at this time in your life. All of us face these trenches. I pray we will all take heed of this word today in whatever trenches we find ourselves! It is with deep conviction I say to you: "My friends, God would have us – as individuals and as the body of Christ – to keep moving forward, keep looking for God's guidance, keep expecting and keep depending on God's step-by-step guidance." To me it is as if God is speaking a word of assurance and encouragement to us saying: "My guidance – my lamp to your feet, my light to your path – is available in *all* the trenches of life. I will never withhold my guidance from you. Walk forward. Venture forth. Keep looking for my light, and I will guide you step-by-step." If this is not encouraging, then what is? Tell me what is.

Now unto God who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before God's presence with rejoicing ...whose word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path ...Now unto the Spirit who is being our Guide through the trenches of life ... Now unto Christ who has promised that we will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life ...to the only God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – be praise and glory now and forever. AMEN.