

Seven Psalms # 5: “Psalms for the Road”
August 25, 2025

Jeremiah 6:19-20
Luke 9:1-6

This is certainly one of the best Sundays of the year. We stand on the edge of a new school year. The campus and the downtown are filled with students ready to get going. Parking is once again at premium, but we hardly mind that inconvenience today as we welcome new students and returning students and together look down the road of the months ahead.

If you are a student new to the University and new to Iowa City and new to this congregation, we are so glad you found us. We’ve been here in this building on this corner for nearly 160 years waiting for you to show up! If you are a student who’s worshipped with us in other school years, we’re glad you are back. And the rest of you—professors, teachers, administrators, retirees—and everyone with no connection to the university whatsoever, we’re glad that you are here as well. Even those of us who are not a part of the vast educational enterprise that surrounds us know how the school year influences the lives of everyone in this community. So it is a time to celebrate.

When we come together, we are aware that there are many other ways to spend this time—from sleep to sports, from brunch to books, the options are almost limitless. But we know that what happens here in this Sunday morning hour can give shape to the rest of the week—and if we engage in worship on a regular basis, it will shape not only the semester, it will shape our lives, giving them a deep meaning and purpose that they would not have otherwise.

To fill in those who haven’t been around, we’ve been spending some time with the Psalms on recent Sundays. As a starting point for my sermons, I’m using the Paul Simon album from a couple of years ago, *Seven Psalms*, exploring how those new lyrics might help us in understanding those ancient words—and how those ancient words can help us understand our contemporary lives.

The Book of Psalms is, we’ve found, a book about the God who is becoming; it is a book of love songs; it is a book for the indignant and for forgiven people who might want to become forgiving people.

And I’m seeing that this is a book of songs for people on the move. Psalms 120 through 134 are a series of “Songs of Ascent”—15 Psalms for pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Throughout all 150 psalms, words such as “go,” “journey,” “path,” and “way” show up again and again.

This morning, we read together one of those Psalms for the road—Psalm 139. This song for the journey seems appropriate, as this morning we see that we travel the road together. We welcome students who either once again or for the first time have made your pilgrimage to Iowa City. We greet people who have recently returned from summer

travels, even as others are preparing to head out in the weeks ahead. And really, this is a day to recognize that all of us here—wherever you’ve been, wherever you are on life’s journey—all of us are people on the road.

The road is a place of choices, of looking left and right, forward and back, and deciding. For the prophet, Jeremiah, the road was filled with opportunity and danger. Jeremiah called the people down to the crossroads, telling them to look. On the road they might discover “where the good way lies.” They could walk the ancient path, God’s way of mercy, compassion, and love of neighbor that offers rest for the soul.

Then, as now, not everyone would choose to walk on that road.

The road is also a place of uncertainty. Jesus tells his early followers: “Take nothing for the journey” and we are shocked. What kind of travel advice is this? Who heads out without some cash, some snacks? And what would be so wrong with having that extra tunic?

And yet, as we think about it, we’re never really prepared for what the journey brings. Unexpected twists and turns reveal to us what we lack. Whatever we might take with us, we carry very little. Perhaps Jesus is being more descriptive than prescriptive.

As he was approaching 80, Paul Simon wrote the song, “Trail of Volcanoes,” singing:

When I was young

I carried my guitar

Down to the crossroads

And over the seas

In these few lines we glimpse the freedom of youth, taking what one needs, going where one pleases. The hope is always that those of you who are young will receive that freedom and make good use of it.

There is an echo in these lyrics of Bob Dylan’s blessing, or prayer, “May you stay forever young.” And we would wish that for students and others in these beginning days. We would wish this for all of us—not that we would not age, but that we would maintain energy and openness and a sense of freedom throughout our lives.

Having heard Jeremiah and Jesus, we are better prepared to listen as Psalm 139 speaks to those on the road, affirming that on this journey our very lives are the subject of God’s care. No place, no time, no circumstance can separate us from the love of God. The Psalmist knows this God as the one who traces our journeys and knows our resting places.

The Psalmist writes of God’s awareness of the human situation: “such knowledge is beyond my understanding, a height to which my mind cannot attain.”

Words begin to fail us.

We speak of “divine omnipresence”—the idea that God is everywhere. We speak of “divine omniscience”—the idea that God knows everything. While such words and concepts might sound impressive, they really don’t take us very far.

Paul Tillich pointed out that such words are “at least as dangerous as they are useful.” When we talk in these ways, we begin to picture God as some super-human being: “omnipresent” like an electric power field; “omniscient” like some vast computer network.ⁱ Sitting comfortably in a sophisticated, liberal church in a university town, we may be amused by the picture of God in, say, Genesis—walking in the Garden in the cool evening breeze—but our own pictures are not much more sophisticated, really.

Perhaps we can learn something from the ancient Hebrew poet.

Instead of speaking of omniscience, the Psalmist wrote: “God, you have searched me and known me.”

Instead of speaking of omnipresence, the Psalmist asked: “Where shall I go from your Spirit?”

Clearly, our lives before God—and the God we come to know at least in part—transcend all the labels we might apply. Our experience tells us that we are known. Our faith affirms that God knows us through and through. On the road comes the realization: “You trace my journeys and my resting places and are acquainted with all my ways.”

Those ways are different for each of us. We journey together, and at the same time, each of us chooses a different path.

Even so, in Simon’s song, he concludes:

It seems to me

We’re all walking down

The same road

To wherever it ends.

Those words can sound bleak or hope-filled, depending on how we listen.

One evening this past week, I was listening to Iowa Public Radio and, quite unexpectedly, I heard the ending of Jack Kerouac’s great beat novel *On the Road*. I’d not thought of it for years. Surprisingly—and somewhat disconcertingly—it was set to classical music. Kerouac writes of sitting in New Jersey and sensing “all that raw land that rolls...over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and

tonight the stars will be out...and nobody, nobody know what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old..."

We're all walking down that same road to wherever it ends.

All our traveling, all our dreaming, not knowing what will happen us or to anybody, but here in Iowa letting the children cry, that is being open to the sadness and the sorrow and the often painful wonder and joy of all of life.

All of it kept in God's care.

We learn this on the road.

We seek to flee from the presence of God. But where can we go? Where indeed? "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." It is in God, in the presence of God's Spirit, that we live and move and have our being.

Wherever we are, God is.

Wherever God is, we are known, fully known.

The good news is that we need not fear God's knowledge. It is a knowing that accepts us *as we are*.

The Christian experience—and the experience of the ancient Hebrews spoken of by the Psalmist—is the experience of a God who is there even when we don't feel the Spirit. The question: "Where can I go to flee from your presence?" speaks of God attending to us in every possible situation in life.

God has searched us and known us. We might not understand it completely, but in every situation we are known by God.

Again, if you are new here today or in recent weeks, welcome.

If you have returned after being away, welcome back.

Every year you'd think it would be the same. Every year it is different.

This year clouds of authoritarian power are looming large over the road ahead. This year basic human decency seems to be vanishing. Universities are under assault. There are those who are trying to turn Christianity into a twisted white nationalist sect.

This is to say, this year we are called to crossroads. Called to consider and to choose again what is good and right and just.

So, I invite all of you to return again, to make worship here a part of your way through the coming months. The truth is, we need you. No, not in a desperate way. But we would

rejoice if you would receive all that we have to offer and become a part of this generous gathering.

I invite all of you to receive the gift that is this community, to be a part of it, and to share it with others in the months ahead. This community will continue to be a beacon of God's love for all people shining on this corner.

Where can we go from God's Spirit?

Where can we flee from God's presence?

We travel together. God traces our journeys and our resting-places.

ⁱ Paul Tillich, "Escape from God," *The Shaking of the Foundations*, pg. 45.