

Psalm 119:105:

"Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path"

A LAMP to my feet... a LIGHT for my path.

It was a sunny summer day.

Our family had decided to visit the Lava River Caves in central Oregon.

We paid the cost of admission, and the ranger gave us instructions. He told us how the cave remained cool, a constant 55 degrees. Then came the instruction about the lanterns.

"You'll need this lantern when you go down there," he said.

"It's very dark. Without it you won't get far."

We lit the lantern, then began the path into the cave...

While we were in the bright sun, the lantern seemed unnecessary.

But soon enough, his words proved true. It got cooler...

and very quickly much darker!

The lantern, which had seemed so dim up above, shone bright and strong down in the darkness. With its help we could see the low-hanging rock ledges, the puddles, and the turns in our path. We held it high before us...

With that lantern, our experience was fun, not frightening.

How different everything would have been if we'd been in a cave like that with no light!

Today, I am the ranger and you are the travelers.

When the worship service ends in a while, you'll SET OUT ON A PATH leading from our front door to a hundred vastly different destinations...

Part of this path is FAMILIAR – we travel it every year.

There's a special sense of that this month of September.

A new school year, with all the change that brings.

And a new season of service here at church too.

This Education Festival Sunday is like the trailhead for new Sunday School groupings, a new Life with God and Life Light classes, confirmation classes, and Children's Choir.

But all of us are on a longer, more unfamiliar path that stretches years ahead into places unguessed and perils unknown.

It's called the PATH OF LIFE.

Let me ask you older folks... when you were high school kids, could you have predicted that you'd face the things you faced, married the person you finally married, and gone through all the experiences you have?

Could you have guessed that you'd be sitting here this morning?

And now, what lies ahead for us?

Wherever your pathway leads you, this much is guaranteed for all of you, old and young...

There will be some Darkness!

Troubles will come to all on this path – those students just starting school, the workers beginning a new job, good-hearted folks joining this church and Presidents who begin their terms w/ high hopes & big promises.

We pastors preach about it to the couples who stand wide-eyed and hopeful at the altar – “You're bound to face trouble,” we caution. But neither bride nor groom nor pastor knows WHERE or WHAT or WHEN...

whether meth addiction or a cancer diagnosis
identity theft or house fire
an adulterous affair or the heart-breaking loss of a child.

Turmoil and trouble will come. That's certain.

Eight years ago this week, Sue and I were wakened by a phone call from our daughter telling us we'd better turn on our TV set – that hijacked jetliners had crashed into the World trade Center in NY.

Remember that day? And how the world has changed because of it?

Life happens. Not all is predictable. Not all is pleasant.

Some of it is very DARK indeed.

You're going to need a lantern!

A lamp for your feet.

A light for your path when darkness descends.

Like the ranger at the Lava River Caves, I am holding one out to you
and saying, "You're going to need this!"

The LAMP in Bible times was not this cool Coleman lantern.

No. Lamps back then were clay vessels – with a larger
portion to hold olive oil (the fuel), and an elongated neck with a hole at the end
to which was tied a twisted thread for a wick..

With a good supply of oil, the lamp would burn for many hours.

Lamps were common in houses.

Jesus spoke of the woman who had ten coins and lost one.

What to do?

Jesus says she "**lit a lamp and swept the house.**"

There were lamps in God's house too.

In the form of a golden lampstand with seven lights burning,
the predecessor of the Menorah,

and of that electric "eternal light" right up there in our church.

Lamp-light was needed then, and is needed now.

Whether as headlights on cars driving down dark roads,

or flashlights held by homeowners who must crawl under their houses,

or as this Coleman lantern at a campsite in the woods.

But the Psalmist speaks of a different sort of light!

The kind that could guide a person through dark times, a clouded future,
and even the valley of the shadow of death.

YOUR WORD IS A LAMP, said the Psalmist.

Ancient words spoken to trembling ears and hearts like the words
a mother speaks to calm a crying child,

like the words from the control tower guiding a pilot in trouble
toward the runway where he'll find a safe landing.

True words. Comforting words. Correcting words. Forgiving words.
God's Words!

If you go out to the narthex after church this morning,
look up at the stained-glass window, and you'll see, in the upper right-hand corner,
a lamp that is drawn something like this
(show illustration, turned down on altar)

That lamp in the window is meant to be a symbol of the Word of God
in the Bible that lights the way in life.

If we are to USE it, hadn't we better KNOW it?

So on this Education Festival Sunday

I must ask you a very basic question. The question on your green insert:

“How well do you know your Bible?”

As a church, we are heavily invested in knowing and teaching this book.

It's part of the curriculum at our day school.

It's practically the entire curriculum at our Sunday School.

It is the focus at our men's breakfast, our Life Light classes,
our small groups...everything we do.

So how are we doing? Are we well-versed in Scripture? Look at the sheet
for a moment and take personal inventory...

(read the questions on the sheet)

I don't mean for this sermon to turn into a Bible Quiz, or for you to think that
the Bible is just a book of information or a collection of good stories.

Last week, I happened to catch a 25th anniversary edition of the game show
JEOPARDY. A dark-haired, youthful Alex Trebek was asking contestants
to pick from one of six categories.

One of the categories was “The Bible.”

As the contestants attempted to answer questions of Bible trivia,
including the river most often mentioned (the Jordan),

I realized that those people could know a lot about that Bible
and still not know God!

So we must come back to the Psalmist's description.

Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

A LAMP. A practical tool for finding our way through life.

The Bible is not primarily a religious ALMANAC jammed with facts about the geology of the flood, the genealogy of the tribes, or the geography of the Holy Land.

It is not primarily a STORY BOOK about patriarchs, prophets, and kings, fiery furnaces and fiery serpents.

It is, rather, a LAMP that provides LIGHT for LIFE.

Not a book about life, but a book that GIVES LIFE!

For in this book, Jesus Himself comes and meets us
and enlightens and warms us,
and guides us safely home.

That's the whole purpose of the Bible, isn't it? That we meet JESUS!

It is, said the Evangelist John, a book that is written
**so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ
and that by believing, you may have life in His name.**

To put it into a word-picture,
lamps and lanterns are of no use until LIT!

This lamp is not LIT until you see and enjoy the life of Jesus shining through it.

So do you? IS YOUR LANTERN LIT?

Today we have a BAPTISM in our worship service.
When he's baptized, little Brandon Herrera will get a baptismal candle to keep, and to re-light as he remembers what happened today.

His little candle lit from the light of the Christ candle.
The life of Jesus entering him as once it entered YOU!

Most of us here would say that, I think – that the Light of Jesus came to us.
That our Lamp was LIT once upon a time.

But a Lamp is only useful if it STAYS LIT. It must have an adequate fuel supply!
The five “foolish maidens” learned that the hard way. Remember them?

In the story Jesus told, there were ten maidens waiting for a Bridegroom to return.

Five were wise. They had a good supply of lamp oil.
Five were foolish. They had forgotten all about their oil.

You know what happened. The foolish ones ran out of oil.
When the bridegroom came, they weren't ready, and they missed out.

My friend, be wise. Get a full supply of oil.
**“Give me oil for my lamp, keep me burnin’ burnin’ burnin’
give me oil for my lamp, I pray!”**

I have Good News for you. Today is a day of grace! God's store is open.
There is oil in plenty for your lamp.

There is wisdom for your confusion,
forgiveness for your sins,
strength against temptation,
comfort and hope for the darkest days,
light for your path, wherever it leads.

All of it in Jesus, who said, **I am the light of the world!**

Jesus is near to you – as near as the word on my lips and in your ears.
Scriptures to read. A preacher to hear. Classes to attend.

So fill your tanks. Trim your wicks.

Has your lamp gone out?
Let Him light again the flame that once burned bright.

In the book, The Lord of the Rings
the little company of the ring has entered a darkness dreadful and deep in
the Mines of Moria.

They are surrounded by enemies, by a bewildering choice of pathways,
and by a daunting task beyond their strength.

But they are not alone. The good wizard Gandalf the Grey is with them.

When the door is slammed shut, sealing them in, they know they cannot back out, but must go through Moria to their journey's end.

“I think,” says Gandalf, “that we will venture some serious light,” and he lights the end of his magical staff.

That light and Gandalf's trustworthy memory, lead them on.

Here we are, brothers and sisters, enclosed by dark times.

There can be no backing out. We are committed to the path that lies before us.

But we are not alone.

The Lord who walks with us

has a light that none can quench and a knowledge of the way home.

He will not fail us!

“I think,” he says to us today, “that we will venture some serious light.”

Yes, we say to Him, “Yes!”

For **YOUR WORD IS A LAMP TO MY FEET,
AND A LIGHT FOR MY PATH.**