

## **PSALM 25:1-8**

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame, let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

## JOHN 8:31-38

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “\_We are descendants of Abraham; and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free?”

Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So, if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.

## **SMOKE AND MIRRORS**

**Psalm 25:1-8**

**John 8:31-38**

A man traveling a long distance by horseback grew tired and needed to rest. So, he tied up his horse, plopped on the ground beneath a tree and fell fast asleep. When he awoke, his horse was gone and there were strange footprints where his horse had been tied. Someone had obviously stolen him so he grabbed a long, thick stick and marched into the nearby village. In the center of town, he began swinging the club and shouted with saliva flying, "If my horse is not returned pronto, I will be forced to do what I did the last time someone stole my horse!"

He was a big man with fierce eyes and a long beard showing remnants of his spittle. The thief, who was among those in the town's center, began to fear for his life for he was well known by his neighbors as a notorious thief and someone might rat him out. So, he slipped out of town and quietly released the horse which shortly thereafter came trotting down the street. The traveler jumped on him, tipped his hat and began to ride out of town when a bystander shouted to him, "What did you do the last time your horse was stolen?" The traveler answered, "Nothing. I just had to buy another horse."

Isn't it wondrous what our imaginations can concoct? When you stop to think about it, a great deal of our behavior is determined by what we fear might happen. It used to be that we kept our speed about five miles over the limit because we did not want to get a ticket. But since the pandemic, it's Katy Bar the Door—people driving 90 mph, weaving in and out of traffic without fear of consequences. And why don't the police do much about it? Because they are afraid of being shot or exposing themselves to the virus. It is all about fear which is fueled by our imaginations.

And yet, our imaginations are vital components in the evolution of our species for without them, advancements in technology and more efficient and better ways of life would never have occurred. We would be worrying about our horses being stolen. But on the other hand, we are often victims of our imaginations because they can alter our perceptions of reality. This makes us vulnerable to those who bend the truth to manipulate us to their will. Facts are facts when they are proven; facts don't change. What can change, however, is our interpretation of those facts.

Currently streaming on Netflix is a compelling series called, "The Lincoln Lawyer." (It has nothing to do with the former President). It is a complex plot which involves a murder and subsequent jury trial. The facts

of the case slowly evolve as the episodes proceed. The defense and prosecuting attorneys have a long history of being on opposites of a case and want to beat each other as if they were the Bengals playing the Steelers. What is fascinating to watch is how they attempt to influence the jury with their interpretations of what happened. And that competition really begins in the selection of the jury itself. Great care is taken on both sides to ask probing questions of each potential juror to expose their prejudices and how those might affect their verdict. It isn't just our minds that play a role in our interpretations, it is also our emotions and they may well override reason when they are in conflict. What is true? What is fabrication? It creates dissonance within ourselves and we can easily arrive at a conclusion that is inconsistent with the facts. As the old saying goes, “\_Who you gonna believe, me or your lying eyes?”

Our passage from John this morning features a fascinating discussion between Jesus and some of his Jewish followers having everything to do with their interpretation of who he is. The context of our passage is important because it is preceded by a heated argument between Jesus and his Jewish enemies. They are not convinced in the least that he is the messiah and are seeking to find a reason to have him arrested. They railed at any suggestion that he was the Chosen One. So

when Jesus proclaimed, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life*, they shot back: *You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.*

Fast forward a few verses to our lesson where Jesus is now with his supporters when he makes his well-known statement: *If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.* His audience is confused and seeks an explanation. “How are we not free? We are enslaved to no one.” But Jesus counters saying: *Truly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin...So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*

In a very real way, we are all slaves to our interpretations because they determine our reality and we try to make all of the pieces of our worlds fit into the jigsaw puzzle of life we are trying to solve. But sometimes the pieces just don't fit together and we get frustrated and then double down attempting to force them into place. Indeed, our interpretations hold a good deal of power over us. Can we differentiate truth from Smoke and Mirrors or do we get tangled up in lies and deceit?

The psalmist himself is struggling with these issues: *O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame...let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. Make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me*

*your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.*

The question before us is, Do we want to be free? Do we want to be guided by truth or do we become slaves to every conspiracy theory and disinformation campaign seeking to shackle us? Who are the wizards behind the Smoke and Mirrors and where do they wish to lead us?

The last verse of the psalm clearly lays out our responsibilities:  
*Good and upright is the Lord; therefore, he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.*

Isn't this where the truth lies and isn't this the path to freedom? We must keep our eyes on being faithful to the gospel and live according to its truth. It comes back to this over and over in the biblical witness. As Micah stated centuries before Jesus, *"And what does the Lord require of you but to seek justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God"*.

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