

Lenten Message Series: Signs for Life: Learning to Navigate Spiritual Living

Feb. 26 - April 12

Series Text: Jeremiah 31:21-22a

“Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take. Return, O Virgin Israel, return to your towns. How long will you wander, O unfaithful daughter?”

Wed., Feb. 26: Ash Wednesday

Message: Signs for Life: Stop!

Scripture: Joel 1:12-14, 2:13-17

Text: Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.”

Theme: God has given us a map (the Bible) for our lives’ journey on the path of life. God also provides us with signs along the way that tell us exactly where we are, what’s around us, and which direction we are going: signs that point out the way; signs that tell us to steer clear of danger; signs that help us avoid the wrong way and to stay on the right path. On Ash Wednesday, we stop. We stop to get oriented, remember our destination and check our course. God calls us to stop sinning, and to recharge.

Opening Song: *Beautiful Things* -Sanctify

Welcome: -Pastor David

Today is Ash Wednesday, and we mark the beginning of Lent with the marking of ashes on our bodies. It’s a sign of repentance, of admitting that we need help, healing, forgiveness, a savior. We can only understand Easter after we understand the need for salvation.

We need to stop living our way and instead choose God’s way. With the mark of ashes, we now transition from learning *about* how we need to change our life path, to actually *living* God’s path. We follow Jesus, as He journeys to Jerusalem, to His cross and to His death. Human salvation unfolds as we first watch Jesus carry His cross, and then when we pick up ours. Our journey, from here on out, begins a steep uphill climb.

Memory Verse:

“If you stray to the right or the left, you will hear a word that comes from behind you: ‘This is the way; walk in it.’” -Isaiah 30:21

Invitation to Observe The Lenten Discipline

BOW #322

Worship Music: - Sanctify

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Oh, the Wonderful Cross

Worship Prayer - Andrew

PP#1: Prayer: “Ash Wednesday”
Hymnal, page 353

Prayer: “Ash Wednesday”

UMH #353

Message: Signs for Life #1: Stop

PP#2: Signs for Life: Learning to Navigate Spiritual Living
Sign for Life: Stop!

“21 Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take. Return, O Virgin Israel, return to your towns. 22 How long will you wander, O unfaithful daughter?...” -Jeremiah 31:21-22a

Signs for Life: Learning to Navigate Spiritual Living. Sign for Life: Stop! Jeremiah 31:21-22, “Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take. Return, O Virgin Israel, return to your towns. How long will you wander, O unfaithful daughter?...”

PP#3: *Image of the distant landscape as seen from the top of a mountain, like Mt. Sinai*

We stop and look out from the top of Mt. Sinai. Far off to the West we can see the Red Sea we, and beyond that, Egypt, the land of our slavery. We look off to the North, and we can see in the distance the Promised Land, where we are headed. Around us are God’s people, a stiff-necked assortment of stumbling and grumbling people who claim to want to follow God but don’t do it very well, or very long. We fit in well in this crowd.

Our God, on the top of this mountain, in great love and a desire for us to thrive, has graciously gifted us the path of our best life, a life for which we have been made.

God has pointed out the right, good path, but we see many other paths as well.

This moment, this vantage point, is important. We stop here to get perspective. We look back from where we’ve come. We look up to see our loving God calling us to abundant life, and we look forward to the destination He has pointed us to. We pause here a moment to get our bearings. We stop here a moment to choose our next steps well.

PP#4: *Image of a road or hiking sign showing a confusing plethora of multiple path options ahead*

The world is full of paths. It’s full of roads. It’s full of options. But not all of them lead the way God intends. In fact, most don’t. And the path that God lays out for us is not the one we would normally choose for ourselves. Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.”

But God has not left us on our own to try to find the path of life. No. He has given us all we need to find the right path, and to stay on it. He sent His Son, Jesus, to make the way, to show the way, and even to be the Way. Jesus journeyed to the cross to make our journey’s possible, that we might have the path that leads to life abundant and eternal.

When we take road trips, when we journey on the highway, traveling to places we haven’t been before, or don’t know how to get there, we get help. We ask directions. We use our GPS app. Some of us still look at a map and plan the route.

PP#5: God's Path for Us Is Our Best Life

1. Destination: The Promised Land
2. Directions: Love God and others

God has given us the instructions for HOW to travel. Our travel guide is the Bible, which shares God's heart and love for us. It shares how we are to travel in love, love for God and love for others. But the exact route that you must take today and in the days ahead, these are not detailed in Scripture. We don't have a step by step route planned for our lives, at least that we can see ahead of time. The Bible contains all we need to know to find God's chosen path for us and to stay on it. But the Bible does not give us each our own specific life plan.

PP#6: God's Path for Us Is Our Best Life

1. Destination: The Promised Land
2. Directions: Love God and others
3. Navigator: The Holy Spirit

God gives us the Holy Spirit as our Navigator. The Holy Spirit speaks words to us as we travel, to stay on the right path. We know our destination, we know HOW we are to travel—in love—but the exact route is usually unfolded as we journey. So, we must 1. listen to the navigating voice of the Holy Spirit—we do that in daily prayer, and we must 2. watch for the road signs along the way.

PP#7: God's Path for Us Is Our Best Life

1. Destination: The Promised Land
2. Directions: Love God and others
3. Navigator: The Holy Spirit
4. Signs: God orients us along the way

Signs. They are crucial, aren't they. Even when told the route to take, we still need signs. Imagine you've never been to Forest Lake before, and you've been invited to Keys for lunch after worship. You know HOW you'll travel: you'll drive in your car. Your friend tells you the route to get there: Take Highway 97 into town, go North on Highway 61, then West on Broadway, the restaurant is on the left, about one block after the interstate.

So, you get in your car and you head out from church. You need Highway 97, Scandia Trail. How do you know where that is? Someone may point it out, but you would confirm that with a what? A sign! You would look for the street sign that says "Highway 97" or "Scandia Trail." Then, how will you know when you come to Highway 61? What will you look for? A sign, as you approach the roundabout. Again, how will you know when you get to Broadway? A sign at the next roundabout. How will you know when you pass over the interstate? A sign will tell you. And so on your journey goes.

So, directions are critical, but not enough! You also need signs that will tell you exactly where you are, what's around you, and which direction you are going.

A couple of weekends ago Vicky Keintz and I were driving the confirmation kids in separate vehicles to the Bahá'í Center. We came from different directions, and I got there first. Vicky called to ask exactly where we were. I had to go out the front door and look for the *street signs*. I said, "I can see we're on Chicago and that the cross street is 36th." She then knew where we were and was able to get there.

Have you ever had the experience when you were heading up to Duluth and you stopped off in Hinkley for a caramel roll...you're busy talking while you're driving...and you get back on the highway again...only to see a sign that says South I-35? Uh-oh. Then comes the next sign: Minneapolis, 60 miles. You made a mistake. You were on auto-pilot, and when you got back on the highway, you started heading home out of habit. You knew the route, had the directions, but it was the road signs that helped you realize that you still weren't going the right way. Road signs help you know where you are, be sure you are going the right direction, and make it possible to follow the directions.

Well, as we commit to journey with Jesus, God has not only given us the destination (to the Promised Land), the directions (love God and love others), and the navigation (the Holy Spirit directing our path day by day), God has also provided us with road signs along the way. Signs that identify the way; signs that tell us to steer clear of danger; signs that help us avoid the wrong way and to stay on the right path.

PP#8: Proverbs 2:9 “Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path.”

Jeremiah 31:21, “Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take.”

Proverbs 2:9 promises that if you listen to God, “Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path.” God has promised help us find every good path. He has given us the route, the road of life, and He also gives us signs to find and stay on the path. Jeremiah 31:21, “Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take.” But to do that, we need to pay attention, we need to be on the look out. We need to see the signs.

Life is a journey. It is traveling the road day by day, the road of our choosing, to the future of our choice.

Lent is also a journey, a journey of alignment, of taking a look at our own life's journeys. Lent is a time when we stop to take a look at where we have come from, where we are now, and where we are going. It is a time to check and see if the path we are on is indeed the path we want to be on. It is a time to check and see if the path we are on is the path God has chosen for us. Lent is a time to check the route, and check the signs, to be sure we are where we want to be.

We're going to use some actual road signs, on loan from the City of Forest Lake, to help us think about and look for the spiritual road signs that God provides to help navigate the journey of life.

So, to begin tonight on Ash Wednesday, we take one of the most common of all road signs. It is a sign that is universally recognized and used around the world: the STOP sign.

PP#9: Stop!

On Ash Wednesday, we stop. We stop amid our hurrying and rushing and living frantically. As the days go flying by, we stop. For usually we barrel through life. And then, all of a sudden, we fly past Easter. And in our hurried state, we never stop long enough to fully grasp the life that Jesus won for us at Easter, and how to choose that path of true joy and peace for ourselves. So in Lent we stop.

You can't read your route, or a map, while driving (at least you shouldn't). You need to pull over, stop and check your course. That is what Lent is about. It is a stopping and checking our course.

God calls us to stop. The STOP sign is one of God's most important signs. God has posted many stop signs to help us on our journeys.

PP#10: Stop!

1. To get your bearings

Psalm 32:8 "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you."

God calls us to stop and to reflect where we are, which path we are on, where we are going. We stop so that we can check our route, to orient ourselves, to ask what we really want out of life and where we want to end up. We stop so we can choose the right path. We stop traveling on the road that seems right to us, but leads to destruction. We stop so we can choose God's path for us.

But our struggle comes not just in choosing the right path, but staying on it. So when we choose God's path of life, we still encounter many of God's stop signs. God puts them there to help us even while we are staying on our right path.

PP#11: Stop!

1. To get your bearings
2. Sinning

John 8:11 "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Hebrews 12:1 "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

God calls us to stop sinning. We are to put away those things that hinder our journey. In John 8, Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery. But don't forget the other part He told her. In John 8:11 Jesus says, "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Jesus called her to stop her sinning. It is not OK for Christians to simply do whatever we want. God has things He wants us to do, and other things He wants us to stop doing. This is what the Ten Commandments are all about. Stop following other gods. Stop using God's name in vain. Stop murdering. Stop stealing. Stop committing adultery. Stop bearing false witness. Stop coveting.

Jesus adds many more in the Sermon on the Mount. Stop uncontrolled anger. Stop hating. Stop idolatry. Stop hurting your neighbor. Stop selfishness.

Paul lists more. Stop stubbornness. Stop creating discord. Stop gossiping. Stop sexual immorality. Stop jealousy. Stop fits of rage.

God uses the stop sign a lot, all over the place. God gives us the stop sign so that we can pause to get rid of the garbage that drags us down on our journeys. Hebrews 12:1 "...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race [there's a journey for you!] marked out for us" [chosen for us by God!].

That is why abstinence is fitting for Lent, and "giving up something for Lent." It is a time to stop and throw out those things which hinder and so easily entangle. You might want to consider "giving up" some sin you struggle with, for Lent.

PP#12: Stop!

1. To get your bearings
2. Sinning
3. To recharge

1 Kings 19:12 “After the earthquake, there was a fire. But the Lord wasn’t in the fire. After the fire, there was a still, small voice.”

God also gives stop signs to recharge and become ready to face what lies ahead. At each difficult time in His life, Jesus stopped. He withdrew. He prayed. He fed on God’s word. He spent time recharging. Then He could face the demands before Him faithfully.

We need to stop and recharge, too. We cannot continue to function well when we continue on continuing. Without sleep our body cannot act crisply and our minds cannot think clearly. Without spiritual rests—Sabbath—we cannot continue to function well. Staying on the right path becomes most difficult when we are weary and not ready. We tend to act more by instinct, we revert to bad habits, we are not careful to check our carnal natures, when we are not rested and not ready. God says to always be ready. That means to be prepared. Stop to pray. Stop to assess our past actions. Stop to reflect on how we are treating others. Stop to hear God’s words for life. Stop so that God can work into us what He wants to come out of us as we journey. Christians most often trip up, backslide, succumb to temptation, when we have not stopped to be prepared. Think about it. When you are tired and crabby, you feel least inclined to turn the other cheek. That’s why God gives us stop signs.

In 1 Kings 19 God comes to Elijah. He has Elijah listen for God. At first he hears a great and powerful wind that tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire finally came God’s voice, coming as a gentle whisper (11-12). We stop to hear the gentle whisper of God.

PP#13: Stop!

1. To get your bearings
2. Sinning
3. To recharge
4. To experience the joy

Exodus 3:3 “Then Moses said to himself, let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn’t burning up.”

It is also stopping so not to miss the wonderful things around. So often we are so busy driving we can’t see what we’re driving past. I’m a sucker for the roadside historical markers. I pull over, and my family groans. Some of the greatest treasures in scenic Minnesota come only when you pull over and stop the car. They can’t be experience while traveling. So God calls us to stop so that we won’t miss some of the greatest blessings He has planned for us. He has plotted our life’s route to go right by some of the best things in life. Unless we stop to take them in, we will miss them.

So, stopping is not just a command, is not just necessary, it is also a blessing to us. Without God’s stop signs we would miss so many blessings. Remember Moses? He had fled from Egypt and was wandering in the dessert for many years. Then, all of a sudden, his journey took him past a burning bush. Do you remember what he thought? “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.” That pit stop changed his life forever.

Or take the shepherds that first Christmas. Their life's journeys took them right past Bethlehem, with angels appearing and singing in the heavens above them. Do you remember what they said to each other? "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." In that stop they came face-to-face with the Christ.

God has placed all kinds of stop signs around for our life's journeys. Stop to get your bearings, to orient yourself. Stop traveling the path that seems right, but leads to destruction. Stop those things in your life that are ungodly...stop sinning. We are tackling that tonight with Ash Wednesday. Stop to recharge and get prepared. And stop to experience the blessings God has placed along our paths.

PP14: *Image of a person driving a car looking at a STOP sign.*

To help us during our Lenten journey to remember to stop, we're passing out little foam stop signs. There is a way to hang them from your keys, or backpack, or whatever else works; or you can peel off the backing and stick it somewhere useful, like your bathroom mirror, or your work laptop, or the dash of your car. I want our little stop signs remind us, and each of the stop signs we see remind us, to stop our sin and get onto the path God has for us.

Each time you come to a stop sign while driving—yes, each and every time!—I want you to take just a quick moment to stop and pray a short prayer. Pray something like, "God, I want to follow you." or "Lord, take away my anger." or "Jesus, help me to love like you do." or pray through the week's memory verse. Each stop sign you come to...use it to stop and pray.

I also want you to stop your daily schedule and do short devotional. Stop and recharge. Do the Upper Room. Sign up for a daily devotional app on your phone. Fast lunch and use that time to do devotions. Feed on God's Word, hear the still, small voice of God. Most times we don't hear God's voice because of how noisy our lives are. Stop and do devotions.

So, during the journey of Lent, it is my hope that the foam stop sign, the devotional time you spend, and each and every stop sign will all be constant reminders of the stop signs that God places in your personal journey.

May this Lenten journey be full of God's stops!

We encounter our first stop sign right now, as we stop to confess our sin, repent, and seek God's forgiveness. Hear this passage from the prophet Joel:

Joel 1:12-14

[12] The vine is dried up
and the fig tree is withered;
the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree--
all the trees of the field--are dried up.

Surely the joy of mankind
is withered away.

[13] Put on sackcloth, O priests, and mourn;
wail, you who minister before the altar.

Come, spend the night in sackcloth,
you who minister before my God;
for the grain offerings and drink offerings
are withheld from the house of your God.

[14] Declare a holy fast;
call a sacred assembly.

Summon the elders
and all who live in the land
to the house of the Lord your God,
and cry out to the Lord.

Joel 2:13-17

[13] end your heart
and not your garments.
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.
[14] Who knows? He may turn and have pity
and leave behind a blessing--
grain offerings and drink offerings
for the Lord your God.

[15] Blow the trumpet in Zion,
declare a holy fast,
call a sacred assembly.

[16] Gather the people,
consecrate the assembly;
bring together the elders,
gather the children,
those nursing at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room
and the bride her chamber.

[17] Let the priests, who minister before the Lord,
weep between the temple porch and the altar.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O Lord.
Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?' "

PP#15: Psalm of Confession

Psalm 51:1-9

Hymnal #785

Psalm of Confession: Psalm 51:1-9

Introduce Psalm of Confession

Read responsively verses 1-9

UMH #785

PP#16: Leader: Christ our Lord came to you to be your Lord and King.

People: Confused, we cried, “Hosanna, loud Hosanna!” and waved the palm branch.

Leader: Yet Christ was not who you wanted Him to be.

People: Therefore we had no use for Him. We rejected Him.

Leader: Pilot stood before you, claiming that Jesus was innocent.

People: Yet in sin we cried, “Crucify! Crucify!”

Silent Prayers of Reflection

Response

Introduction: Palm branches are a symbol of praise and honor. Ancient people waved them to greet military victors and political leaders. When Jesus came to Jerusalem, the people waved palms to greet Him as their King. Yet their allegiance was fickle and brief. These palm branches here today we waved during Palm Sunday last year, proclaiming Jesus as our King. Yet we have betrayed Him and violated our praise. They remind us today of our sin.

Leader: Christ our Lord came to you to be your Lord and King.

People: Confused, we cried, “Hosanna, loud Hosanna!” and waved the palm branch.

Leader: Yet Christ was not who you wanted Him to be.

People: Therefore we had no use for Him. We rejected Him.

Leader: Pilot stood before you, claiming that Jesus was innocent.

People: Yet in sin we cried, “Crucify! Crucify!”

PP#17: Burning of the Palm Branches

Confessional Liturgy: Prayers & Hymn: *I Need Thee Every Hour* -Andrew

Preparing the Ashes

Mixing the Ashes with Oil

Thanksgiving over the Ashes

BOW #323

Separate PP Slide: Imposition of Ashes

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Repent, and believe the Gospel.”

Repentance with Ashes

Everyone is invited to come forward for self-imposition of ashes. This is an ancient sign of repentance, as testified in Job 42:6, “Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” We bear the mark of sin on our bodies. Make the sign of a cross with the ashes on the back of one of your hands to show that we are indeed sinful and in need of God’s saving grace. As you do, say out loud:

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Repent, and believe the Gospel.”

Imposition of Ashes

Song: *Murdered Son* -Sanctify

Separate PP Slide: Psalm of Confession

Psalm 51:10-17

Hymnal #786

Words of Assurance: Psalm of Confession: Psalm 51:10-17

UMH #786

Closing Song: *Lord Have Mercy* -Sanctify

Memory Verse:

“If you stray to the right or the left, you will hear a word that comes from behind you: ‘This is the way; walk in it.’” -Isaiah 30:21

Announcements: -Pastor David

Separate PP Slide: Benediction

Leader: In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

People: We testify to the truth of Christ: in the chambers of our human hearts, and in the lives we go to live.

Leader: So I say to you: Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. And may the peace of Christ bless and keep you as you live your life as a testimony to Him.

All: Amen!

Benediction: (*using 1 Peter 3*)

Leader: In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

People: We testify to the truth of Christ: in the chambers of our human hearts, and in the lives we go to live.

Leader: So I say to you: Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. And may the peace of Christ bless and keep you as you live your life as a testimony to Him.

All: Amen!