

*“The Paths of Life”*

Through our **“Sacred Earth: Sacred Work” Worship Series**, we are learning **“The spiritual journey can be understood as a dance moving in and out of four mystical paths, each with their own gifts: awe and wonder; letting go; creativity; compassion and justice.”** “These ‘cycles of life’ are born out of the seasons of the planet and remind us that there is a time for everything and that fluctuations of the spirit are part of being human.” **“Can we accept the Holy invitation to move fully into all the rhythms of life?”**

This Sunday’s Worship Celebration is a good time for us to better understand how all four of those paths can be combined in one’s life, instead of getting stuck in one of them. So, let’s take a moment to look closer at what is said about these paths in our Bulletin today. The start of our Worship is titled, **“Path 1: Recognizing Inherent Goodness”**. The text states, “The first path invites us to celebrate! The pulse of creation is singing the goodness of God and God’s gift of goodness in all things. We become more aware of the beauty of all that is and tap into gratitude as our first task in creating more goodness in the world.” It could well be a great life to stay on this First Path, but there is so much more to life!

Further down the first page of the Bulletin starts the section titled, **“Path II: Befriending the Dark Places”**. The text under that states, “The second path recognizes with open hearts the pain that co-exists with goodness and gratitude. We listen to the groans of the world; and the Spirit helps us to grieve and to intercede on behalf of all those who suffer, letting go of our fear that can make things worse at times.” Our Scripture from Psalm 30 very much deals with this second path and we will return to this focus in a few moments.

The next section’s title in the bulletin is **“Path III: Exclaiming the Divine Creative”**. The explanation below it states, “The third path creates space to explore how God is working in and through us and all of the universe to renew each day every direction. Each moment offers opportunity to express our God-gifted creativity. We hear messages - ancient and new - that express and affirm the Divine at work and encourage us in our creative collaboration with the Divine.”

The final section of the Bulletin is titled, **“Path IV: Embodying Compassion and Power”**. The explanation for it is “The fourth path will lead us out. We pray for movement within our own hearts to embody peace and passion - compassion and power - on behalf of spreading goodness throughout the week. We are not at the mercy of ‘the way it is,’ we can claim our agency to be fully present and fully active in the world into which we now go.”

Marcia McFee, the Creator of the concept for the “Sacred Earth: Sacred Work” Worship Series indicated her believe that a person of faith benefits greatly by incorporating all four paths in their own living. Getting stuck in one or another of those four paths may be a good life but it could also be a very sad existence – falling far short of one’s potential to be the person God intended you to be, especially, when an individual remains long term in the second path – focusing on suffering, hardship, and loss.

**Our Reading from Psalm 30 provides us valuable insight into how and why we are able to move from the “Dark Places” to “Exclaiming the Divine Creative” and “Embodying Compassion and Power”.** Our first hymn, **“Thy Word Is A Lamp Unto My Feet”** is a musical example of dealing with the same subject matter. Another Old Testament Reading, which focuses on our need to recognize we inevitably move through all the many different aspects of life is found in the Book of Ecclesiastes. There was a song recorded by the Byrds based on that passage from Ecclesiastes. You may recall, not long ago, we watched the following music video of the song, **“Turn, Turn, Turn!”**

Facing and including the darker or negative aspects of life in our own self-understanding and in the recounting of our Relationship with God and other people is painful but deeply meaningful. Dennis Bratcher explained, **“This psalm proclaims that endings are not as final as we sometimes think they are. It does not deny the reality of the darkness. It does not deny the experience of the absence of God. And it does not deny the dismay of finding that our beliefs do not always stand up to the realities of life. But it affirms that out of that grievous experience of death can emerge a new joy, a new hope, a new future, and a new confirmation of what it is to be the people of God.”**

Bratcher continued, “It proclaims that God is faithful in the lives of his people. This is no prosperity message. It is a message that refuses to be perverted into glib assertions of triumph. The images in the psalm are far too realistic and somber for that. Yet, the experience of being drawn out of the Pit and restored to life are an affirmation that faith matters and that God cares, and that those two factors together can lead to new joy.” **“It is one thing to affirm all the right theology; it is another to go through the darkness to find a new dawn!”**

Bratcher recommended, “focus on the function and importance of retelling the story of God’s grace as it works out in the real life experiences of people.” **“The entire thrust of this psalm is toward recounting to others the experience of God in the midst of crisis. ‘Tell me the old, old story’ is more than the words of a Gospel song; it is an expression of a fundamental truth about being God’s people in the world.”** “... the story of God’s work in the lives of people and in the community of his people is at the heart of biblical faith.”

Bratcher concluded, “It is the faith and joy of one who has walked his entire life in darkness, who cannot sort out all the details of his encounter with God, but who can tell the story of that encounter and how it changed his life: **‘I once was blind, but now I can see!’**” (“Third Sunday of Easter” by Dennis Bratcher posted on crivoice.org)

I am sure all but the youngest of us have experienced or witnessed suffering and hardship, especially in connection with the death of a family member, loved one, or friend. Finding ways to integrate that experience and its meaning for you, including the meaning and importance of the departed person in your life is not a quick and easy process. **It is a journey, which may well create some dark times and places.**

The words of Psalm 30 remind us of those difficulties and it provides us with the testimony of a person of faith, who came to recognize how God’s Agape Love and Faithfulness were always with the psalmist. **If you are still grappling with such a loss or the memory of a very negative experience, the testimony of this psalm and of many others is that even though we may have felt abandoned by God, our Divine Parent is always with us to bring us Agape Love, Hope, and Peace.**

So, we can deepen our Relationships with God, one another, and with many others – all people, if we don’t get stuck in the darkness. The framework of the Four Paths of Life listed in our Bulletin encourage us to recognize as part of God’s Creation, **we are all to be celebrated as “good” and that “goodness” is what the Creator intended and wants for us and all people.** We don’t have to be afraid of or imprisoned by the dark places of life but **find in them fellowship opportunities with and aid others in the darkness.** We are called to grow out of a purely self-centered view of our lives into **declaring with our word and deeds God’s Creative Love to many others in need of that Good News.** Finally, integrating the whole story – including the dark places – into our faith, understanding, hope, and agape loving **we go out into our other relationships and the world embodying God’s and Jesus Christ’s Compassion and Power for Justice, Peace, and Transformation.** Bring those four Paths of Life together into your Path of Life today and always! Amen.