

## **“Any Road Can Get You There”**

Rev. David Gregory

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Lent 1



### **Readings**

*Psalm 25:8-10* from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

God is fair and just;  
He corrects the misdirected,  
Sends them in the right direction.  
He gives the rejects his hand,  
And leads them step-by-step.  
From now on, every road you travel  
Will take you to God.  
Follow the Covenant signs;  
Read the charted directions.

*One But Many*

Suzy Kassem in *Rise Up and Salute the Sun*

One God, many faces.  
One family, many races.  
One truth, many paths.  
One heart, many complexions.  
One light, many reflections.  
One world, many imperfections.  
ONE.  
We are all one,  
But many.

It is odd to think that we have entered a second Lenten season in the shadow of a pandemic, but here we are, beginning “Year Two” in a world that bears little resemblance to what has come before. I’m not sure what I thought twelve months ago, or how I perceived the impact of the emerging scientific data, or what my outlook was for how my daily life would be. Uncertainties have made some things more certain. We must keep going. It is not over. Time and diligence are still required of us. It’s not a matter of whether we like it or not, or if we’re tired or bored or frustrated. Vaccines are bringing hope, but of course it isn’t really that simple.

This is a long haul, and though we sometimes feel imprisoned in our new reality, there is no choice but to choose our paths carefully and continue moving forward. Periodically there are new corrective lenses through which we can see a portion of the road ahead. But the destination is not yet in view. Like Abraham the ancient patriarch, to whom Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their origins, we have been called to embark on a journey whose end we cannot know. We’re simply called to travel. But when the inevitable forks in the road present themselves, how will we know which one to take?

In fact, the choices are never simple, but in seasons like this one, in the lengthening light, there are new sources of wisdom from which we can draw. There is strength for the journey. We may have to stop and rest once in awhile. We may have to reconsider some of the choices we have made, at times even backtracking and taking a different road. The only thing that is certain is that we will get there.

This is an underlying truth in the work of Suzy Kassem, a poet and philosopher in the lineage of Egyptian sages and mystics. Her work challenges our tendency toward narrow focus, pulls us away from our familiar cultural polarizations toward a more universal experience of humanity and wonder. We are always tempted to extol our own path, because it happens to be the one that we have discovered. Others could discover it if only they had the opportunity, we think. Thus has been the motivation for the evangelization of the world, and the drive to convert indigenous peoples, either willingly or otherwise. What kind of world view must one have in order to suggest that one’s experience of faith and practice should be prescribed for everyone else on the planet? If we use the phrase “one God” to describe the universal energy that we call life, there will be plenty of room for that one God to have many faces. If we recognize the common elements of all humanity, then there is ample space for one family to express in many races. If we consider this universal energy to be one truth, then it will always follow that it can be expressed in many different ways. We are long overdue for a brand new great awakening to this important and fundamental idea.

The journey of Lent is a process of awakening. It is a season of growing awareness, of noticing. It affords us an opportunity to discover what is being unveiled within us, and how slight changes in trajectory can take us to entirely new and far more desirable locations. The Hebrew songwriter speaks of a God who corrects the misdirected and sends them in the "right direction." For many folks, this one idea has formed itself into a calcified religion, with a far-off deity who disciplines his followers and keeps them in line. But like everything else, it isn’t quite that simple. Eugene Peterson’s beautiful and accessible paraphrase helps us with the nuance. God becomes less capricious and more understanding, less like the impatient Father exasperated with his children’s misdirected actions, and more like the loving Mother who takes the hand of her child and leads her safely through the darkness. And then there is the phrase that challenges our certitude. "From now on, every road you travel will take you to God." To which we might respond, “Well if that’s the case, why does any of it matter?”

It matters because it reflects a Divine Character, whose loving reassurance does what cold discipline cannot do. It tells us that mostly we're on the right track. We just need to be a little more vulnerable and open ourselves to a few tweaks. And those slight adjustments make all the difference in the world. They bring us into alignment with our deepest Divine Self. They give us a sense that we will get through this, one step, one day, one month, one year at a time. And we ALL will get there.

The pandemic—for me—has been a long journey of self-awareness. Freed from the distraction of running up and down the highway in a head-spinning pursuit of punctuality, it was in the first two or three weeks of the lockdown that I truly began to breathe again, for the first time in a long time—maybe for the first time ever. There were many things I felt I simply had to do, and suddenly I could not do them. Amazingly the world did not spin off its axis. Then came a time period where I considered ways to bide my time until the restrictions were lifted and I could go on my merry way and put everything back where it belonged. And then there were surges and setbacks, outbreaks and variants, all of the things that gave us pause. Scientific advice became clearer even in the clouds of political discord. We had daily choices to make. Where would we go? Who would we see? How would we stay safe, express our love for neighbor and devote ourselves to the common good?

In my work as a spiritual director, it has been my mantra to share with others my view that all of life is discernment. We often consider discernment as something we do periodically before a major transition like a job change, the decision to get married, to buy or sell a house, or to have a family. But true discernment is to be found in the small decisions we make all day, every day. It happens when we slow down our actions as well as our breathing, jumping off the speeding train that we used to call our lives and taking time to think, to imagine, and intuit.

We've been given no choice but to do this, and in the short distance we can see down the road, our choices will remain limited for quite some time. We used to jump on a plane without much thought. We used to greet one another in crowded restaurants with hugs and kisses. We used to sing in choruses together without a thought of sickness or death. But now we are called to "follow the Covenant signs," and to "read the charted directions."

A year ago in the season of Lent it was a tougher sell to get us to slow down. This time around, it's just how we live. We are in this together, regardless of our race or ethnicity, our faith tradition or spiritual background. It doesn't matter what our gender identity or expression might be, our marital status, or our roles in our world or in our work. In the work of discernment, we are all the same.

*One light, many reflections.  
One world, many imperfections.  
ONE.  
We are all one,  
But many.*

