

“LESSONS FROM THE FOOTBALL FIELD:
II – READ THE PLAYBOOK AND LISTEN TO THE COACH”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Psalm 119:105-112

Matthew 6:1-15

I grew up in a house on the top of the hill of Melbourne Boulevard in Thomson Estates in the 60's and 70's. In those days, Melbourne Boulevard ended one house up from us – now, there are houses way beyond that – but back then, it dead ended one house up from us. And on that hill, which started at the bottom where Melbourne Boulevard and Courtney Drive meet, there were about fourteen or fifteen houses – and I think it's safe to say that when I was growing up, there were almost thirty kids who lived on the hill!

We were outside all the time, at least until the street lights came on – that was our sign to be in the house. And we played all sorts of games – kick the can, hide and sick, Red Rover, Red Rover, frisbee, and of course, baseball and football. Back in those days, someone would just suggest football and a gang of kids would show up in our backyard. (We didn't have a fence, and we had the most kids, so it ended up being the gathering place!)

Those football games were free for alls. No plan, no organization really – teams were just picked and plays were played, and of course, every once in a while, somebody got hurt, but I don't remember any real lasting injuries. It was just good plain fun.

Oh, how times have changed! I don't know how many kids play in pick-up football games in their neighborhoods, or actually how many kids play outside today. And most assuredly, football, the football we watch on TV or go to a stadium to see, is way more complicated than those carefree, childhood games.

Because, you see, everything is planned out. Everything! Watch a game on TV and you'll see the evidence. Look at the quarterback in the huddle, and you'll see him consult a play chart that is actually on his wrist. He flips up a Velcro cover, looks at the chart, and then closes it up and talks to his players.

Look on the sideline and you'll see the coach standing there with headphones on (through which he speaks to the quarterback) and a laminated chart of plays in his hand. And if you looked a little further, you would discover that every single member of that team and its staff all have a notebook – a playbook that they've studied religiously since training camp.

Football teams have a plan layers deep, and it guides them in everything that they do in the game.

Plans are important, playbooks are important, manuals are important. They show us what to do to keep things moving in the right direction, to have success, to make things work, to avoid chaos. It's amazing what happens when you follow them, and what can happen if you don't.

I've told you before about me and changing ink cartridges in my multiple computers. Each computer printer is different – different brands, different ink cartridges, and different ways of putting them in. I have trouble every time I go to change a cartridge – because I forget which is which – and inevitably get angry because I can't figure it out.

You would think, wouldn't you, that I would go right to the manual and save myself the frustration. But no, I'm stubborn, and I'm sure I'll remember, so I lift the lid of the printer, and begin the fight to release the used-up cartridge. How hard can it be to open the latch? Amazingly hard, it turns out.

Finally, I either call on Beth (our church secretary) to come in and rescue me, or I'll go to the playbook, the online video that shows me what to do – and you know what? Amazingly, when I follow the directions, it works every time!

I think that's a pretty good snapshot of all of us. So often, we think we know better. We don't have to consult a manual, a playbook, or whatever. We go on our own – and too often, we're the worse for it.

Friends, our team, the church, has a playbook and it's called the Holy Bible, and we have a coach named Jesus. The Bible gives us direction and guidance, inspiration and challenge, words that stir us and words that make us ponder – and amazingly, ancient words that speak to us today just as surely as they spoke to people in ages past. Our playbook is a great gift from God, and sadly, like me with the computer manual, too few people spend time in it.

But let me tell you what you're missing if that's you. And let me use today's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures to do that. You heard it read. It contains a very, very familiar line that we've heard throughout our lives – “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path . . .”

To understand how amazing that is, let me unpack it a little for you. First of all, “thy word” can be read in two ways. Most assuredly, it refers to holy scripture. These words illuminate the way for me. But we need also remember that Jesus is the Word, as we hear in the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and

the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” So, you see, this line has a double meaning. Scripture guides our way, and so does Jesus.

And those are just the first two words of the passage. Move on, and it says, “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” At face value, that sounds like one simple statement about the Word showing the way. But, here’s the thing! Here’s what’s interesting about that. The words “lamp” and “light” in Hebrew (the language in which it was written) mean two different things.

“Lamp” in the original Hebrew speaks of a candle or a glistening lamp that gives off a very small amount of light. It is just enough to see right in front of you. As someone described it, “Picture what you are able to see when you are using candlelight when the power goes out, or while eating a romantic dinner with your loved one.”

The word “light” in the original Hebrew means “a light, bright, clear, like morning,” a light that is bright enough to see what is around you. It’s the kind of light you might have on your street or on your home’s walkway so that people can walk along there at night safely. The light this psalm speaks of is much bigger, brighter and widespread than the light of the lamp.

Now, let’s go back to the whole phrase and see how different that sentence reads, how much fuller it seems. Thy word, Lord, helps us step by step every day, but it also shines a light on the bigger picture you have for us. You, Lord, care about the little bitty details of my life, and the bigger picture as well – you are there through it all – guiding me, lighting the way.

It is fascinating to discover things like that when you open the pages of scripture and spend time there. You discover things you never knew, things that make life more clear, things that reassure you that God is always there.

Let me tell you something else interesting about this psalm. This is the longest psalm in the Bible – 176 verses. But that’s not what makes it so interesting. Actually, sadly, it’s what keeps some people from reading it in its entirety. What’s makes this psalm so interesting is that it is actually a teaching tool.

Let me explain. This psalm is an alphabetic acrostic poem, which means that each verse begins with a successive letter in the Hebrew Alphabet. So the first verse begins with the letter a in Hebrew – aleph, and then the second is beth, and so on – to the end of the Hebrew alphabet. It was a way to teach the Hebrew alphabet, and the law, the Torah. It was literally learning the ABCs of the Hebrew faith in alphabetical order.

You know, I was working on this sermon about the same time I was helping my little great-niece celebrate her seventh birthday. While at her house, I was in on a conversation her four year old sister Aubree was having with her Daddy, my nephew Bo. Aubree is in pre-school at Caravel Academy. Bo said, “Aubree, what was the letter in school today?” It seems that every day they highlight a different letter. So Aubree says “S.” And Bo replied, “What words start with s?” And darned if she didn’t start running them off – “Star, sky, sun, school, sister . . .” It was so cute, but it so reminded me of this psalm and how effective it was at teaching about God.

When you open the playbook, and engage with the Word, you will make all sorts of discoveries – the best of which is that God is always there, as the psalm says, in “lamp” ways, to walk with us step by step, and in “light” ways to show us the bigger picture and carry us through it all.

And then, go deeper and listen to the coach – you’ll find his words in the Gospels and other New Testament scriptures. In the Gospels, the words, the parables, the stories illustrate beautifully the lamp and light of God’s Word. The Gospel lesson today is a perfect example of that. Jesus teaches about how to live as faithful people – with humility, giving, forgiveness, steadfastness, prayer. He invites us to all of these things, all the while reminding us that we are not alone on the journey – God is with us.

If you’ve ever had a coach of any kind, you know that he or she only wants the best for you. They’ll guide you, teach you, sometimes challenge you, push you further than you think you can go – but all with the goal of a better you, and success for the team. The coach is on your side, right there with you no matter what – there to celebrate victories and there to endure defeats – but always there.

And so is the Lord. Always there – guiding us, teaching us, sometimes challenging or pushing us further than we think we can go – but always with the goal of a better you, and success for the team – which means ushering in the kingdom of God.

So here’s the thing. Like football players, we have a playbook and we have a coach. We have all things needed to run the race of life faithfully and fully, so why would we not use these gifts from God? Indeed, they are gifts. We are not in this race of life unequipped – God has given us everything we need.

The invitation today and every day is to turn to the playbook and turn to the coach – every day. I can promise you this – the more you do, the more you’ll want to. And the greater life will be, because you’ll see things through new eyes and understand more day by day.

I want to close by telling you a story about how God does this – how he makes things unfold, how with lamp and light he shows the way. Many of you know that last Monday was my birthday, and one of the gifts I received was a book about birds – a really beautiful book. Well, of course, I was already working on this sermon, and right away, upon seeing that book, I remembered a story that Bishop Robert Schnase once told about the power of reading scripture on one’s life.

One day Bishop Schnase spotted what he thought was an unusually beautiful and rare bird near his home. After searching bird books, he discovered that the bird was actually quite common in his area, and after that, he began to see them regularly when he went on walks and hikes. He couldn’t believe he had never noticed them before, and started to wonder what else he was missing.

So he bought a pair of binoculars and more bird books. The more he read, the more attuned he became to them, and he began to spot interesting birds everywhere, and would then learn more about them. He says “I saw birds I would have overlooked before, noticing them in places I wasn’t aware existed. I began to see the world around me from a different perspective. My eyes have been opened to a whole new world.”

And then he says this, “In the same way, when we open Scripture, and start to explore life with God, we detect God’s presence and activity that we never before noticed. A new world opens. We learn a new vocabulary. With soul work, an unseen world that we never knew existed becomes visible. Regular Bible reading and study brings topics before us that we otherwise overlook, and we learn to identify them with greater clarity. We learn to see God.” (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, “Growing in Grace,” p. 76.)

We learn to see God. I can’t say it any better. If you are not in the habit of reading scripture and praying, I invite you today to make a fresh start of it. And if you are, keep at it, because you’ve seen what it does for you. God’s Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path – that shows us the way not only forward but deeper. There is no need for anyone to wander aimlessly through life – because friends, we have a playbook – the Holy Bible, and we have the greatest coach of all – Jesus our Lord – to show us the way. Thanks be to God!

Amen.