

Where's the Trail?

by Julie White

I left the campground bathroom and headed down the path to walk back to our campsite. After striding through the woods for several minutes, I emerged from the trees only to realize I had taken the wrong path. The campsites along the road in front of me didn't look like at all like the ones where I had come from. Different tents, different RV's, different people.

Uh-oh.

I started to retrace my steps, but darkness was quickly descending. In addition, I didn't have a flashlight, I didn't have my cell phone with me, and – on top of all that – I'm "directionally challenged!" So, I couldn't find my way back to the bathroom. I couldn't remember the right turns to take. I couldn't even remember our campsite number to ask someone for help.

Fortunately, my husband had been keeping track of the time. And, because he knows me—both my strengths and my weaknesses—he figured out I probably was wandering around in the woods. So, he hustled along, checking every path, and quickly found me.

Obviously, being lost in a campground is not exactly life-threatening, and I never actually was very far from our site. Nevertheless, the sensation of being lost was disorienting. The realization that I was off the path, and couldn't find my way, caused me to feel a bit anxious and somewhat helpless.

I remembered this episode one day when I stumbled across an article about the Appalachian Trail. Unlike a campground path, the AT is a genuine trail. A trail that is 2200 miles long, passes through 14 states, and often is wild and remote. A trail where it's incredibly easy to get lost.

No one likes to get lost in the wilderness, and no one likes having to hunt for lost hikers. So more than 70 years ago, volunteers started to paint vivid white marks – known as "blazes" – on a variety of trees, rocks, and fence posts to help travelers stay on the trail.



Even today, in this age of detailed topographical maps and GPS devices, the old-fashioned blazes are useful. In fact, they're more than useful; they're *essential*. And that's because, for a variety of reasons, it's not always easy to discern the exact route along the AT.

Parts of the trail often get overgrown, wild animals make ancillary paths that might look like the trail itself, and sometimes there's just no visible footpath at all. It's no surprise, then, that as hikers clamber over rocks or cross rushing streams, they sometimes wind up asking themselves, "Where's the trail?"



Thankfully, the white blazes are there to point the way. Following the blazes keeps you on the trail so you don't get lost. Following the blazes keeps you headed in the right direction.

As I was reading about the blazes along the AT, it prompted me to consider these questions: *How do we find – and follow – the “blazes” that God has laid out for us? What are the spiritual signs that can guide our steps, so we find our way “home” to him, and to all the richness of life that he wants us to experience?*

As I was pondering and praying over these things, the Spirit reminded me of this wonderful counsel from God, passed on to us by the prophet Jeremiah:

*This is what the Lord says,
“Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.”*

Jeremiah 6:16 – NIV

The book of Jeremiah is filled with a great deal of sadness (there's a reason he's called “the weeping prophet) and a big chunk of that sadness is expressed immediately after the verse written above. It's painful to realize it, but...in the face of God's signposts...in response to his “blazes”...our spiritual ancestors made the wrong choice. They refused to walk in God's way and therefore, at least in that season, they never found rest for their souls.

However, you and I can choose to respond differently. We can embrace these prophetic words and act on God's incredible invitation. These words assure us that we *can* discover God's blazes. We *can* stay on the right trail if we...

Stand – Look – Ask – *and* Walk.

Stand

Our world is on a continual escalator; always heading up and never seeming to stop. Years ago, two cardiologists realized that the problems experienced by their heart patients often were a *symptom* of their anxious and stressed-out lives. In response, they coined the term “hurry sickness,” which so aptly describes our tendency to restlessness and busyness.

There is great wisdom in their assessment. After all, just look what we do to ourselves: we impose the dual pressures of time *shortage* (there's not enough hours in the day to accomplish my “to do” list) and time *urgency* (there may be enough time, but I don't feel like there is so I have to rush and press toward completion).

What's the logical result? Hurry sickness! A life filled with a never-ending stream of unfinished tasks, or tasks accomplished by the expenditure of huge amounts of anxiety and adrenaline. Is it really a surprise that we have ulcers, heart problems, and other physical issues?



Contrary to popular belief, busyness is not a Christian virtue! In fact, this frenetic rhythm is a direct impediment to the abundant life that Jesus offers (John 10:10).

One answer – not the only one, but the powerful one given by Jeremiah – is to *stand*. To stand still and *pause*. To take time to think, to reflect, and to just *be* in God’s presence. To be still so we can know our God more intimately (Psalm 46:10).

Standing still at the crossroads gives us time to live in the moment...to slow down our racing hearts and staccato thoughts...and then embrace the next step of Jeremiah’s godly advice: to look.

Look

When we’re driving and we come to a halt at a stop sign, what are we supposed to do? Look around! We take our eyes off ourselves to discern what is happening around us.

In the same way, when we pause from our busyness, then we are able– then we are *free*– to search for the blazes God has placed along the trail for each of us.

Yet when we live as if we’re continually racing to put out a fire, then taking a pause doesn’t come easily or naturally. We must be intentional about putting “stop signs” in our schedule. Sometimes this means we stop stuffing ever more activities and tasks into our over-stuffed lives. Sometimes it means saying “no” to a request. It means we stop looking at others, and worrying if they move ahead of us, because we’re not in a race.

Most importantly, it means we admit we are not self-sufficient, so as we release our desire to be stubbornly *self*-reliant, we become more *God*-reliant.

When we stand and look around, then – and only then – can we truly get our proper bearings, and perhaps even catch our breath! As we stand and look, we can learn to embrace a less-hurried life.

And then we’re truly ready for the next step, where we ask God to point us in the right direction.

Ask

Prayer, of course, is how we make our “ask” from the God who created us in his image. What, though, do we ask for?

- For God to make us happy?
- For God to help us complete our largely self-imposed “to do” list?
- For God to enable us to accomplish our plans, in our timing, in our preferred ways?

If we’re honest, such questions form the subtext of many of our prayers. Jeremiah, though, urges us in a different direction: he invites us to ask for the ancient paths of God. However, this requires us to ask some different kinds of questions. Such as...



- Father, have you brought me to this particular blaze, at this particular time, for a particular reason? Is there something you want me to see at this point in my journey?
- As I stand at the crossroads, are there emotions you want me to pay attention to? Or to release to you?
- Are there beliefs about you, or about myself, that are distorted? Do some of my ways of thinking need to be realigned so I can stay on the right path?

Asking, then, is far more than just telling God what we want, or prefer, or expect. Asking is a time for pondering and discerning, as we talk with God and listen to God. It's an opportunity to face our inner fears and ask God to help us. And then we can open our hearts and expose the places that hold past hurts and present struggles.

“Asking” means we are willing to listen to God's answers and then respond with trust. To trust his blazes more than we trust the influence of social media, or well-meaning friends, or the values of our modern culture.

So, we stand, we look, we ask. We ask in faith. Faith that God has a path that we can discern and follow. Believing that when we stay on his path, we will find the good way...and joyfully walk in it!

Walk

This is where “faith” becomes “action.” This is the moment where we set out along the trail because we choose to trust God. We trust that we *will* find the good way because God has marked the path—that he's properly highlighted the twists and turns, so we can reach our destination.

However, this assumes we will follow his blazes when we see them. Do I? Do you?

Sometimes we allow ourselves to become distracted by enticing sights along the way. Or we become lost in our own thoughts and forget to keep checking for God's markers. Then – all the sudden – we inadvertently step off the path, and we find ourselves restless, anxious, uncertain. We find ourselves rushing around in desperation.

What we should do, though, is simply listen to Jeremiah once again. *Stand. Look.* And find the blaze. Then get back on the trail and resume our journey with God.

None of us ever walk God's trail flawlessly. We stumble, veer off the path, and sometimes get lost. Yet each time we renew our journey, we put ourselves in a place where we can experience the best part of Jeremiah's prophecy: as we stand, look, ask, and walk...then God will lead us to places of rest with him.

Rest...for our Souls

Rest is a word we bandy about, yet rarely experience – because God's rest is unique. He's not talking about the rest of dropping exhausted into bed after a too-full day, or the rest we experience when we “surf the net” to escape.



He's talking about sabbath rest. Rest as a part of our rhythm of life. Because this is the rest that calms our restlessness and stamps out our incessant busyness. This is the rest that refreshes our hearts and renews our souls.

This is the rest we can experience not just at the end of the trail, but all along the trail. This is the rest of contentment we can feel each time we see another blaze that God has left for us; a blaze which assures us that we are on the good path.

This is true rest, but it's not idle or inactive. It's rest experienced God's way, as we purposefully and confidently stride along the trail he has marked out for us.

So, I invite you to join me in listening to these timeless words from Jeremiah: to stand, look, ask, and walk in God's ancient path. His proven path. The path of truth revealed in the Scriptures and confirmed by the Spirit. Wherever we may be along the trail, let's keep our eyes open for the white blazes that will clearly guide us on our journey.

Our rich, never-ending journey with God.

The journey where we continually leave restlessness behind and continually head toward rest for our souls.

Julie White holds an M.A. in Ministry and Leadership from Hope International University in Fullerton, CA. She trained as a spiritual director through the Journey Program of The Leadership Institute in Orange, CA. She serves as the Executive Director of The Unfolding Soul. www.theunfolding soul.org