

LIONS ON THE PATH

Rev. Jimmie Scott

Wednesday, May 14, 2025

When I became ... First, before I do this, let me acknowledge my wife and ... [Congregants applaud] So, I want to do a little talking about my journey, and she's been a large part of that journey.

When I became a full-pledged adult [congregants laugh] which was ... that tickles you, huh? [Laughs with congregants] That was probably, I thought, at least around the age of 38 ... but now I'm beginning to wonder about that. [Congregants laugh]

At any rate, I finally had to decide what I wanted to do or to be for the rest of my life. And I had tried about 17 different paths—a lot of different jobs. And I couldn't find happiness in any of them. Though I did realize that I could accomplish a level of success in all of them. And I *did* succeed, to varying degrees of satisfaction.

And then, finally, I came to an understanding that what I really wanted to do was a combination of all of them. So, then I officially began the path of this wonderful thing called ministry. And, wow! What a journey; what a life it has been for me.

It's been the physical manifestation of what I think that popular song, "Stairway to Heaven" by Led Zeppelin means. Interestingly, when Jimmy Page and Robert Plant wrote that song back in the '60s, and began recording it in 1970, those were some of the darkest days of my life. A period when I wondered what would become of me.

So, looking back on it today is an interesting process. It was a time when many paths were in front of me. It was a time when I had many doubts. And it was a time when I didn't feel whether I wanted to do anything. So, looking back on it, I don't know if it was depression; if it was frustration; whether it was the result of the pressures of society and the world that we lived in at that point in time. But I know I had many doubts

And the words of that song often ring in my head. One particular sentence:

*There is a lady who's sure that all that glitters is gold.
And she's buying a stairway to Heaven.
And when she gets there she knows, if the stores are all closed,
With a word, she can get what she came for.*

Ooh, ooh, and she's buying a stairway to Heaven.

*There's a sign on the wall, but she wants to be sure
Because, you know, sometimes words have two meanings.
And in a tree by the brook, there's a songbird who sings.
Sometimes all of our thoughts or misgivings.*

Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgivings. And so, as I'm listening to these words, I'm thinking to myself, "What is this? Is it a test?" And now I'm starting to dialogue with my own indwelling God.

And this evening's talk, title, comes from one of my favorite life metaphors. There are always lions in the path. That metaphor represents formidable obstacles that one must confront and /or overcome on any worthwhile journey. And it's been with me for a long, long time, because I could always see the lions before I could see the opportunity. And, therefore, I ended up focusing on the lions as opposed to the opportunities.

So, the thing I want to get across this evening—if I get nothing else across—is that every worthwhile journey has some difficulty ... and sometimes can be potentially dangerous because of the nature of the obstacles.

And, in my mind, there are only two major obstacles. The first one is the fear of change. And the second one is the fear of failure.

And both of those fears ruled my childhood in ways that I can now look back upon and see that they made a significant impact on my psyche. The fear of change can stem from a desire for stability and predictability, while the fear of failure can lead to avoiding change and also avoiding challenges. And if we do those things, we miss out on opportunities.

So, the imagery of lions emphasizes the difficulty and potentially dangerous nature of the obstacles that we sometimes have to face in our lives because of the strength and the will and the courage required to make drastic life changes. It takes a lot of will to make drastic life changes.

And if you can imagine a kid with bad teeth, low self-esteem, many other emotional problems trying to figure a way through that maze of stuff to believe that he could actually have happiness, love, family conditions that were amenable, prosperity ... whatever. That's a hard stretch to make. At the same time, it was something of a painful reality.

What I've found, though, through working my way through that maze, is that that is a large part of my spiritual journey. And today, I'm grateful for that. I like that term "spiritual journey," because I had some other terms, like, "*This is BS.*"

But the thing journey does for me, is it helps me understand that it's a process. And it's not just a process, it's a process of growth; it's a process of discovery; it's a process of transformation. And through these experiences and challenges, as opposed to seeing life as a destination, I began to see it as a journey. And from that perspective, my emphasis on journey has shifted to enable me to learn some very important lessons.

One lesson is my personal evolution that has happened along this journey has made an immense impression—not just on my own personal psyche, but on my family, as well. I just got back from my last grandchild's college graduation. I never even dreamed of having grandchildren. So that's a huge blessing to my spirit and to my soul. It's made me understand that it's sometimes necessary to struggle before you can succeed.

And so, tonight, whatever is taking place in your life—whether you're enjoying your journey, whether you're struggling with something personal—know that there is always is an opening wherein you can move forward.

The strongest definition of success, in my opinion, does not spend its time worrying about achieving goals. What it's more about is personal growth; it's more about making positive contributions to one's own life and to the lives of others; and it's more about finding some tools for measurement and happiness or well-being that you can utilize to make a difference in the world. And if we are wise enough to understand how subjective those tools are, and how subjective sometimes life is, we can learn to enjoy this journey no matter how challenging it becomes.

The body that we inhabit is a gift from the universe, and it doesn't always serve us well. And it's not necessarily something that we've done. It can also be a result of the environment in which we live, the challenges that we've had to overcome, the kinds of things that we've had to do in order to get to where we want to get through in life. There are myriad circumstances and conditions that contribute to these body temples that we inhabit.

But if we practice good habits and do the very best that we can, we can overcome any deficits that might appear in the body, in the mind, or in the spirit.

The strongest definition of success for me is not about achieving goals, but it's about growth, and it's about making positive contributions.

So, I want to talk about some tools for measurement. One is happiness.

Have you ever thought that you can be as happy as you want to be? Ever really considered that reality? Never? Anyone? [Congregants laugh] It is a reality! And once I realized that, I'm starting to get a handle on this thing. Now, what do I do with it?

[Another] one: How can I make a difference? How can I make a difference?

In 17—now 18 different jobs—how can I make a difference? That's all I need. How can I make a difference? The rest of the BS I've got no time for. So, I don't have to spend my time worrying. I don't have to spend my time in fear. I don't have to spend my time worrying about paychecks or any of that, because I believe that I can always provide for myself, because I always have. So why should that change?

And then this wonderful thing called age comes along. [Congregants laugh] And you begin to think, *"Well, I'm not physically as strong as I used to be; but, on the other hand, I'm a lot more mentally strong than I used to be."* And so I can shift my energies from the physical to the mental and then from the mental to the spiritual.

And the spiritual is born out of my faith. I believe. I've always believed. I've believed even when it's been detrimental for me. I still believe, and I'll be believing 'til my last breath.

So, lions on the path. There are a few of them. But I can assure you that the greatest lion on the path is the lion of fear. So I want to talk about fear.

I have a colleague in Unity that I'm quite fond of. He's a great guy. I've loved him since I've known him. And he told a story in a recent *Unity Magazine* that I just happened to pick up and read, and I did not know this about him. Because I just always saw him as who he was. His name is Tom Shepherd ... Rev. Tom Shepherd.

In the winter of 1970, as he tells this story, he was living in a place called Mineral Wells, Texas. And he made a life decision to enroll in the U.S. Army and to enroll in their flight training program to become a helicopter pilot to fly medical evacuation missions to pick up wounded soldiers from the battlefields of Vietnam.

But when classes began, he discovered that he suffered from what he originally thought was a fear of flying and he later discovered that it wasn't that at all it was literally a fear of falling. And what he understood is that helicopters—when they fall—they fall hard and they fall fast. Because when the engine goes out, the rotor keeps going and, actually, it keeps going at a faster rate.

So the flight instructors, the trainers, all of the powers that be recommended to him that he really needed to drop out of the program. So, he asked for a weekend pass to try to figure things out for himself. And he drove to Fort Worth, Texas, wandered around aimlessly and stopped in an ice cream parlor for an ice cream sandwich. And then he noticed an amusement park nearby with the Ferris wheel and roller coaster. And he decided to test himself by riding the Ferris wheel.

He decided that the roller coaster was a little scary ... [Congregants laugh] But he thought it was nothing compared to the helicopters.

So, he rode the roller coaster for a couple of rounds. He got out and he mustered up his courage and said he's going to see himself—visualize himself—on the top of this Ferris wheel. So the Ferris wheel had a name and the name was Wild Mouse. And he said it featured a sheer almost straight drop. And he sort of came to himself. He's, *"No way am I going to do this."*

And he thought to himself, *"Well, what am I going to do with my life? This is what I want to do."*

So, he looked back up at the Wild Mouse and he said the words of Jesus came into his mind: *"With God, all things are possible."*

So, he paid for a ticket. Trembling, while his car appeared on the landing. And he got in the car, and halfway up, he looked full way to jump out. [Congregants laugh] And he knew that that wasn't a workable option. So he closed his eyes and he hung on for dear life, and he said he screamed all the way to the platform.

And so, when he reached the platform, he was shaking; was breathing heavily. But he knew he was alive. And then he did the only logical thing he could think to do. He bought eight more tickets. [Congregants laugh] And on the ninth ride, he said his eyes were wide open. And at the end of the ninth ride, he exited the car, looked back at the Wild Mouse, and yelled, *"That all you got?"* [Congregants laugh]

And he said that Monday morning, the fear of the helicopter falling was no longer a problem for him. He went back to flight school and properly executed the simulation process. The instructors still flunked him out. But they were amazed. So, they allowed him to start from the beginning, all over again with another class.

As a result, he flew medevac planes in Vietnam; managed to save a few lives before getting shot down along the Laotian border in March of 1971. He said he's never flown since. But the experience that he underwent taught him the value of Ralph Waldo Emerson's advice, *"Do the thing you fear, and the death of fear is certain."*

So I ask you this evening: What is your thing? You have a fear that life has let you down. You have a fear of longevity, of aging. All of these things enter into our psyche from time to time. But the fact of the matter is: we are prepared for these moments, whatever they are. Whether it's graduating from school, whether it's becoming aged, as we say, we are prepared.

There's a line in the book of Hebrews, the 12th chapter, verse 1. The writer says, *"Lay aside every weight, every burden, every thought, attachment or belief that is not or does not serve you or your life's journey. Your purpose."*

Lay it aside. Stop dwelling on it. Stop giving it your attention.

In this case, the reality for Tom was not a fear of flying. What had happened is, as a child, he had fallen down a flight of stairs and crashed his nose against an unfinished hardwood floor. And from that incident forward, he had felt terror doing anything that could cause a loss of balance. So, it wasn't about a fear of flying; it was about a loss of balance.

These wonderful little tools that we have that's called the brain can sometimes get carried away. And so, we begin to imagine things that are not real. And we take a hold of them, and then they take a hold of us and begin to control our lives. And those are the kind of lions that I fear the most.

An interesting thing about the pride of lions: it is the females who do the bulk of the work. The male lions usually lie around and sleep all day. [Congregants laugh] But there's reasons for that. And the reasons are: they do the heavy lifting. When they have to kill elephants and larger beasts, then the male lions come into play. And they do their share.

So this universe that the Spirit has designed for us has all we need, and will ever need, to keep lions out of our pathway, and to make our way safe, smooth, and successful. That's lions in the path.

That's all I can say about it. God bless. (Congregants whoop and applaud]

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