

The Journey: Signposts
First United Methodist Church of Olympia
August 3, 2026
Rev. Heather Sparkman

The revelation of God is whole and pulls our lives together.
The signposts of God are clear and point out the right road.
The life-maps of God are right, showing the way to joy.
The directions of God are plain and easy on the eyes. (Psalm 19:7-8 MSG)

“Blessed be God, who has given peace to his people Israel just as he said he’d do. Not one of all those good and wonderful words that he spoke through Moses has misfired. May God, our very own God, continue to be with us just as he was with our ancestors—may he never give up and walk out on us. May he keep us centered and devoted to him, following the life path he has cleared, watching the signposts, walking at the pace and rhythms he laid down for our ancestors. (1 Kings 8:56-58 MSG)

“Don’t look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don’t fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.” (Matthew 7:13-14 MSG)

Any unfamiliar journey is made easier by signposts. When we find markers along the way, we gain assurance that we are on the correct path. Well traveled pilgrimage paths incorporate sign posts as a part of the experience so travelers have touchstones along their journey.

Sometimes I tell the story of getting lost at Lazy F Camp. I went hiking, up behind the camp, and did not tell anyone where I was going. I was at a retreat in October and I went hiking after lunch.

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Because we were past the equinox, the sun was setting early. I assumed that the hiking trails behind camp would be well marked and easy to navigate. I assumed there would be signposts.

Signposts on a hiking trail might look like a trail map, signs with arrows pointing towards different trails, or even the clear presence of trails. As I climbed higher into the hills, the trail became less distinct until at some point I realized the trail both ahead of me and behind me was gone. I was well and truly lost.

Pilgrimage roads rely on signposts to mark the way for travelers so they do not end up lost.

One of the most famous pilgrimages, which Pastor Alexa walked in May, is the Camino Santiago which has many paths that lead to the Santiago de Compostela in Spain. It is known as the Way of St. James.

It has two famous signposts. The radiating shell and yellow arrows. This is what a website that helps people plan their Camino trip says,¹

¹ <https://caminoways.com/camino-markings>

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The **scallop shell** and **yellow arrow** are the ‘symbols’ of the Camino de Santiago and they will guide you on the way. The scallop shell is one of the most iconic symbols of the Camino and is still used today to guide pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela along the many different routes. Painted or printed on walls, sidewalks, tiles, or Camino markers, the scallop shell will help you find your way. These markings placed at regular intervals make the routes extremely easy to navigate.

These markings make the routes extremely easy to navigate. That is the exact point of sign posts. To help us navigate. For a long time, the radiating scallop shell was the main signpost on the Camino. Ancient pilgrims used to wear a scallop shell attached to their clothes as they walked the path. The shell marked them as pilgrims but it also had the practical purpose as it could be used to scoop food or water along the way.

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Now, the symbol of the shell has radiating lines all coming together in the middle to symbolize the many paths that lead to the one destination.

The yellow arrow is a more recent signpost added to the Camino de Santiago. Don Elías Valiña Sampedro was a parish priest and scholar of the Camino. In 1984 he became convinced that parts of the camino were being lost and he set out to fix that problem.

With a can of yellow paint and Citroen he began restoring the Camino Frances, the part of the camino that originates in France. He cleared brush from the path and marked anything along the way - fences, rocks, trees - with the yellow arrow in order to guide pilgrims towards their destination.

He recognized that the route would fade into oblivion without the signposts necessary to guide travelers and keep the route in use. Signposts matter when we walk into the unfamiliar.

All spiritual practices, including pilgrimage, are meant to connect us to God, to ourselves, and to the world around us. We practice an outward action that leads us to notice an inward grace. The act of noticing signposts and following them can lead us to the inward practice of searching for signposts from God on our spiritual journeys.

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Our Scripture from the gospel of Matthew says this in the translation we read today,

“Don’t look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don’t fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.” (Matthew 7:13-14 MSG)

Jesus says these words as he is instructing his disciples on the way to God. Do not look for shortcuts, he says. In other translations this same passage reads, “enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction...” When a road is wide we rarely have need of signposts. The path is easy to see and stretches out before us.

Jesus warns us that this is not the way to God, however. We are not to look for the easy path, the wide road, or the shortcuts. Instead, Jesus says, “the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” In our translation this morning he says the way to God is vigorous and requires total attention!

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When we pay attention we can see the signposts on our spiritual journey that will lead us along the narrow path, the path that leads to life. I started this morning by saying that signposts are necessary on unfamiliar roads. Jesus, in giving these instructions to the disciples, is not telling them that they have to know the path to God. Jesus is telling them that they can find the way if they pay attention.

Attention is exactly what I lost when I was on that hike at Lazy F. I was walking along, not really paying attention to my surroundings or to the trail until suddenly it was gone. In this case, it wasn't so much a wide road and it was finding myself in the wide forest with no path back to camp.

I walked for a long time in the direction that I thought might lead down the hill. The sun was starting to set and I was getting more frantic when I heard the sound of a car driving past. The sound of the car helped me orient myself towards the road that ran towards the camp. To be close enough to the road to hear a car meant that I was farther away from camp than I expected but it also served as a signpost to help me navigate my way out of the forest.

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Signposts in our faith life operate on this dual level. They can guide us on the correct path and they can reorient us when we find ourselves lost.

Our reading from 1 Kings comes at a time when the Israelites have finished building the first temple for God. Solomon is king and he has finished the temple that was his father, David's dream. At this moment, what might be considered the pinnacle of faithful life in the journey of the Israelite people, Solomon stands before the people and offered a blessing over them.

His blessing is not to praise them for the building of the temple, or to admonish them to keep up the maintenance of the building, or to build more so that their towers might reach even higher up to heaven.

Instead, he asks that God keep the people on a righteous path, that God walk with the people and keep them centered on God, watching for God's signposts so they will not stray. Solomon is acknowledging that walking the path of God, walking a faith journey requires guidance from God, markers along the way that keep us to the narrow way.

What are these signposts? On the camino we might look for the scallop shell and yellow arrow. At Lazy F, I was hoping for trail markers or a trail map that was not there. But in our faith life? What are the signposts that mark our way?

Scripture is one of the foundational signposts of our faith. In a different translation, the passage from 1 Kings reads like this, “but incline our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments, his statutes and his ordinances that he commanded our ancestors.” Where do we find these commandments and statutes? We find them in Scripture. When Jesus talks about the narrow way that leads to life, he is describing a life lived according to God’s word.

But many pilgrimages have more than one signpost. Like the camino with the shell and the arrow, we have more than one signpost in our faith life. We can look to prayer, to the workings of God in everyday life, to the movement of the Spirit, and to worship for signposts as to the ways of the

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Lord. Whether we are in need of direction or reorienting, these signposts keep us on the narrow path described by Jesus.

We can also look to each other, our fellow pilgrims, to help guide the way.

On the camino website that helps people plan their pilgrimages, the signposts are described. The site assures travelers that they will not need a map. They only need to look for the yellow arrows and scallop shells to find the way. Then, the site says, if you can't find a marked signpost, just look around for the other pilgrims. If you see a group of people walking, you can follow them and be assured you are on the right path. When I walked alone on the hiking trail at Lazy F I was not only without physical signposts, I was without fellow pilgrims to help show me the way.

This of course comes with some caution. If we look to other pilgrims as signposts we need some way of verifying their direction. On the camino that would be looking for the shell and the yellow arrow. On our spiritual path, we look to the words of Jesus as the ultimate signposts. We are called to love God and neighbor. Fellow pilgrims help lead the way towards this, but we all need the signposts that keep us to the path.

We must also realize that if we look to fellow pilgrims to keep us on the path, they might also be looking to us. We might, like Don Elías Valiña Sampedro, realize the path is being lost and we need to get out a can of yellow paint, start clearing brush, and leaving signposts for our fellow pilgrims. Or, we might be the ones looking for the yellow arrows to find our way.

At the heart of following Jesus, walking that narrow path, we must realize that we are meant to do it in community, with each other. In the readings from 1 Kings and Matthew, the words spoken are addressed to the community. The people are accountable to each other. One day one might lead the way and then stumble and need someone else to lead the next day.

Living signposts found in our fellow pilgrims are more about the community holding each other to the narrow way than about one person charging out

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front and others blindly following along, ignoring other signposts along the way. This is one of the ways that Communion acts as a signpost for us.

We come to the table together, in community. We serve each other, we eat from the same loaf, drink from the same cup. This is a shared table set for us by Jesus. We all come in need of forgiveness, in need of guidance, in need of grace.

So, let us come to the table this morning, looking for the signposts that guide us on this faith journey and let us come together, fellow pilgrims seeking the way, both leading and following each other as we seek God together. Amen.