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Psalms 122:1–4, NRSVue.

¹ *I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”*
² *Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.*
³ *Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.*
⁴ *To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.*

Within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Here are verses 7 to 11 of Psalm 16:

⁷ *I praise you, LORD,
for being my guide.
Even in the darkest night,
your teachings fill my mind.*
⁸ *I will always look to you,
as you stand beside me
and protect me from fear.*
⁹ *With all my heart,
I will celebrate,
and I can safely rest.*
¹⁰ *I am your chosen one.
You won't leave me in the grave
or let my body decay.*
¹¹ *You have shown me
the path to life,*

*and you make me glad
by being near to me.
Sitting at your right side,
I will always be joyful.*

This Psalm is often called a Psalm of Faith. We're looking at the second half of it. The Psalmist speaks of his dependency on God, and of God's counsel during the long hours of a night. The Psalmist thinks only of God's teachings and knows that God stands beside him. God protects him from fear. So, during times that are physically and spiritually dark, he can celebrate and rest safely. God will not abandon him to death. Neither his body nor his soul will decay. Up to this point, God has guided him along the path to life in the Kingdom, and at a time like this, he is so glad to be walking next to God. The Psalmist has made a practice of keeping God at the center of his mind. He doesn't turn to God only in an emergency, only when he is under duress. He is - at all times - an instrument of God's instruction and guidance. He is always prepared for the darkest night. He is guaranteed of more than just survival: no matter what happens, he is going to live in joy. This is a powerful statement. He says, "*I will always be joyful*" when he is in his "*darkest night*". That's because he is always guided by God.

Some years ago, I was in Jerusalem for an academic conference. I stayed in Israel for a couple of weeks to see the country, to see the places where Jesus had

walked. I had a detailed paper map of Jerusalem and I was riding public busses. Early one day, I was standing on a bus, looking down at my map and then up at the neighborhood we were driving through, trying to figure out where to get off to see the next site on my list. A boy, who turned out to be twelve years-old, walked up to me, and asked me if I was an American. I said yes. He said, me too, that he lived in New York City, but spent his summers with his grandparents who were Israelis. He offered to show me around Jerusalem. I told him that I appreciated the offer, but that his grandparents would probably not approve of him spending the day with an adult stranger. He smiled and asked me why I was in Israel. I told him that I was a professor and that I was sightseeing after a conference. He said that as long as we only went to public places, his grandparents wouldn't mind at all. As it turns out, Israelis, even in the biggest of their cities, have traditionally felt far safer than Americans do in our cities. This boy and I got off the bus and walked to his grandparents' house, and sure enough, once they saw my U.S. faculty ID, they were happy letting Yaakov, which means Jacob, show me around. So, there I was, with a personal guide who knew the city inside out – because that is what Yaakov did in the summer: he explored Jerusalem.

Whenever you are trying to find your way around somewhere, you want to have the most knowledgeable guide you can get your hands on. My guide in Jerusalem was a boy named Yaakov, and I couldn't have had a better guide, but our guide as we walk in the Kingdom of God should be God. However, even people who are sincere and longstanding believers, often wonder just how God is supposed to guide them. Wendy can tell you that I have a horrific sense of direction. I can get lost going somewhere that I've traveled to twenty times. Here is something different though, between having Yaakov guide me in Jerusalem and having God guide us on Earth. God is not like Yaakov. Yaakov was like a super Google Maps. He didn't just tell me exactly how to get to the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, telling me when to turn left and when to turn right: he told me exactly what to look at when I got there. One of the soldiers guarding the Knesset knew the kid and welcomed us in. When Security found a pocketknife on me, and they saw that I was with Yaakov, they didn't take my lock blade away from me. But God is not the same kind of guide as Google Maps or the illustrious young Yaakov. God guides us differently. If we make a wrong turn, God doesn't say, "*Recalculating route,*" and then tell us to make a U-turn as soon as it is safe to do so. In fact, God doesn't send us off in the correct direction in the first place.

God doesn't say turn right, go three hundred yards, and your destination is on your right.

God gives us what we need to direct ourselves to where we need to go and to do what needs to be done when we get there. With God, we're like a Boy Scout trained in the ways of the wilderness and armed with a compass. Indeed, God gives us two things: the tools to find our way in life and the knowledge to make the right decisions. Here is something from Psalm 32:

*⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*

*⁹ Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
which must be curbed with bit and bridle,
or it will not stay near you.*

God relies first on instruction, on teaching us to find our own way. God also keeps an eye on us, in case we need more counseling along the way. God tells us not to be like a horse or a mule, with a giant head and a small brain. We are made in God's image and God is not stupid. God wants us to use the minds given to us. Google Maps treats you like an idiot – and yes, that is how I need to be treated when being given Earthly directions. Even Yaakov realized very early on in the day that I needed very specific directions to find my way around Jerusalem, and what sites to see in the city. He took me to the Western Wall and the Temple Mount, and to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which was built in 326 A.D. on

the site where it is believed that Jesus died on the cross. He took me to Via Dolorosa, the famous route that Christians follow as they trace the path of Jesus as he carried his cross. Yaakov wasn't even a Christian, but he knew the places I would want to see. However, God gives us far more independence. That's what being a person of faith is all about, being given that knowledge we need to see us through life, along with periodic, continued training by God. Yes, we are given the knowledge that comes with faith. And we get some tools to use along the way. God gives us knowledge and tools. In truth, it's just one tool: the Holy Spirit. That is our compass. Armed with our Christian training, which we get largely from Scripture, prayer, and from those who have helped us learn the ways of Christ, along with the Holy Spirit, that is how we find our own way through life.

Let's look closer at our compass, the Holy Spirit. At the onset of Jesus' adult ministry, just after being baptized by John in the Jordan River, Jesus is tempted by Satan. Jesus did not decide on his own to go into the desert:

4 *When Jesus returned from the Jordan River, the power of the Holy Spirit was with him, and the Spirit led him into the desert.*

The Holy Spirit directed Jesus to meet Satan in the desert. In other words, Jesus used the same compass we use. We always say that our goal in life is to follow in

the footsteps of Jesus, to emulate his behavior. So, it makes sense that we use the same tool that Jesus used while on Earth: The Holy Spirit.

What does that mean? Google Maps cannot direct you anywhere if you shut your car off. Yaakov wouldn't have been able to tour me around Jerusalem if I had sat down on the curb and refused to move. The Holy Spirit needs to catch us in motion. We must have the nerve to go out in life and refuse to take no chances. We have momentum. We are doing what Jesus did, witnessing to those with whom we come into contact, spreading the Word, and accepting the inspiring grace of God. The Holy Spirit catches us in those moments of doubt, when we truly do not know which way to go – and gives us the truth. We are thus directed through life through continuous spiritual education. We start out with the knowledge that we have gained by studying the ways of Jesus, then we are guided by the Holy Spirit, who supplies us with extra spiritual knowledge when we need it along the way. Indeed, in John 16, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "*the Spirit of the truth*". That's the secret to letting God guide us through life. We need to always be thinking about whether we truly know what we're doing – or if perhaps what we need is another lesson in the truth from the Holy Spirit to set us back on the path to and through the Kingdom.

How does the Holy Spirit tell us the truth when we are about to miss some great opportunity in life? How do we catch those times when we need extra direction, more inspiration? The Holy Spirit comes to us in gentle ways, telling us that there is something we need to know as we proceed. The Holy Spirit fills us in on the truth – and we are the ones who act on it. But there is no easy answer to how we learn to sense the Holy Spirit talking to us. Consider 1 Corinthians:

¹⁰ But it was to us that God revealed these things by his Spirit. For his Spirit searches out everything and shows us God's deep secrets. ¹¹ No one can know a person's thoughts except that person's own spirit, and no one can know God's thoughts except God's own Spirit. ¹² And we have received God's Spirit (not the world's spirit), so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us.

The Holy Spirit does indeed tell us wonderful things that come directly from God. The way we get this information is by learning little by little to detect and embrace the presence of the Holy Spirit. Some people call this our “conscience”, as if it were just us on our own discovering things that we haven’t known before. We have to learn how to walk in the Kingdom of God in this very complex world, and it calls for continuous training in the truths that come from God.

At one point during the day, Yaakov took me to the area that is believed to have been the Garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives. The name is Hebrew for “*Oil Press*”, and the Garden is dotted with Olive trees, some of which are at least a thousand years old. It is believed that there are olive trees

there that were there when Jesus prayed in the Garden of the Oil Press just before the Romans arrested him, tried him, and executed him. While Yaakov and I were walking through the Garden, I asked him if he liked spending the summers with his grandparents. He beamed more brightly than I expected, and energetically said yes, that his grandparents were nice people who were good to him and bought him books. I asked him if they were his father's parents or his mother's parents, and he looked at me with an odd questioning expression, as if I should have already known the answer. Then I noticed an older woman who was standing there, listening to our conversation. This woman had a small gold cross around her neck. She spoke in an American accent: "You stay with your mother's parents because your father is mean to you?" Yaakov nodded yes. He suddenly looked sad. For the next fifteen minutes or so, the three of us talked about Yaakov's situation back home. His mother would send him to her parents every summer to give him a break from his abusive father. Yaakov poured his heart out to the two of us. Then, as Yaakov went off to look at something, I asked this woman how she had realized that something was up with Yaakov. She said she had felt God speaking to her when she heard the boy respond to the question about how he liked staying with his grandparents. She felt God telling her that this boy had something dark inside him, and that he needed to talk.

That's the best that I can offer. I can't give you an easy way to learn to feel the Holy Spirit delivering incremental truths at just the right moments. You practice the things that we have talked about in the past to gain the basic knowledge that comes with faith. You pray and read Scripture, you make sure you truly live like a Christian and you emulate the behavior of Christ. That gives you much of what you need to know in life to guide yourself. But periodically, you need to know more. So, you focus on God so that God will speak to you through the Holy Spirit. It takes time to hear the Spirit – and the effort is well worth it.

I want to say one more thing about feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit. It's not a passive thing, where all you can do is hope that the Holy Spirit reaches out so strongly that you cannot fail to sense the Spirit's presence. A lot of it has to do with making sure that your mind is a fitting place for the warmth of the Holy Spirit's embrace. Live like a Christian and give the Holy Spirit a welcoming home.

Lastly, here is the beginning of Psalm 122:

*¹ I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the LORD!"*

*² Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.*

*³ Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.*

*⁴To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.*

This Psalm was recited by pilgrims to Jerusalem, which I was at one point, when I was guided by Yaakov. I love this Psalm because it reminds me of my visit to Israel. We are all finding our way to Jerusalem – the New Jerusalem. The best way to find our way is by always listening for the Holy Spirit to whisper to us quietly when our spiritual knowledge is insufficient.

Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for the knowledge that we have gained by spending years studying our faith. We thank you for the new knowledge that we will gain, over and over, throughout our lives, as the Holy Spirit continues to educate us.

Amen.