

Scout Sunday March 17, 2024     *“What Path Are You On?”*  
Message from Ed Weber, Troop 200 Scoutmaster

When a young person passes from a Cub Scout Pack to a Scouts BSA troop, it is called “Crossing Over”. Often there is a ceremony that incorporates walking over a bridge. The Pack leaders are on one side, and the Troop leaders are waiting on the other side to receive the new scout. As the new scout steps off the bridge, they are greeted by the troop leaders and their new scout peers. It is a very symbolic ceremony, and it is just one step on the many different paths a scout can take.

The official goal of Scouting is not to have every scout become an Eagle Scout, but it is that each scout should be able to achieve the rank of First Class. For those of you not familiar with Scouting, the ranks, in order, are Scout, Tenderfoot, Second Class, First Class, Star, Life, and Eagle. We often refer to advancement as “The Trail To Eagle”. A scout who has earned the rank of First Class will have learned critical life skills such as first aid, cooking, and swimming.

In my years with Troop 200, I have seen 10 scouts complete all the requirements to become Eagle Scouts. A scout must earn merit badges. They learn outdoor skills. They provide leadership for other scouts. It all culminates in a project that benefits their local community. All of the work must be completed before a scout turns 18. Just last week, two young men who joined us from another troop received notification from the Scouts BSA National Office that they are now Eagle Scouts. I am not sure why we call it a “Trail to Eagle”, because not one of those young men have taken the same path. For some it seemed easy, for some the challenges seemed insurmountable. Some became Eagle Scouts at the age of 15 or 16, and some barely made it before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. The common trait all Eagle Scouts share is persistence, and faith that if they keep working, they can reach their goals. Not all scouts reach the rank of Eagle, but I have no doubt at all that every scout will be better adults because of the experiences they have along the way.

I still remember my first hike as a young scout, and I have told the story many times. My home troop, Troop 15, in Ewing, New Jersey, generally did at least one backpacking trip a year. Scouts would carry their own tent, food, and clothes. I was 11 or 12 years old, and our goal for the weekend was to do about a 20-mile section of the Appalachian Trail. I was by far the youngest and smallest scout on the trip, and truth be told, I was not prepared. I had food, I had a tent, and I had a sleeping bag, but I had no experience, and even less common sense. All of my food was in cans, so it was heavy. My sleeping bag was a poorly-rolled cotton bag, and it was also heavy. Worst of all, I was wearing boots that were brand new. To say I struggled would be kind. By the time we got to lunch on Saturday, the adult leaders were trying to figure out what to do with me. It was absolutely one of the two lowest moments I have had as a scout or leader, and I have never forgotten that day. I knew what path I was supposed to be on, and it didn't matter. I failed, and I failed hard.

From that point on, whenever Troop 15 went on any kind of hike, I was the poster child of what not to do. As stories do, the legend of Ed Weber grew over the years. I think by the time I became an Eagle Scout, people would talk about how I brought a sink and an iron with me. It was embarrassing, but it also forced me to learn, grow, improve, and prove myself. Troop 15 kept hiking, and I never missed a trip. As I grew older, I got better equipment, more experience, and I eventually would lead the hikes. At some point I realized that this story did not have to be an embarrassment, but could instead be a beacon

for myself, and an example for others. The path I was on that day did not change, but my interpretation and my perspective did, and that has made all the difference.

One of the requirements to become a Second Class scout is to be able to find directions during both the day and the night, without using a compass or an electronic device. Because we live in Maine and the night sky is so clear, we usually teach scouts that they can find Polaris, or the North Star, by using the Big Dipper. While it is useful to know where north is, that is not a map to a specific destination. However, if you are lost in the woods and at least know what direction you are traveling in, you can make an informed decision about what to do. That can mean the difference between trudging 40 miles through a forest, or walking an easy one mile to the nearest road.

If any of you are anything like me, I suspect your spiritual path is similar to my hiking experience. Maybe you joined a church as a kid because that was what your family did. For me, it was the Covenant Presbyterian Church, in Trenton, New Jersey. My parents took me and my two brothers to church every Sunday. We were like the US Post Office of church: rain, snow, gloom of night, it didn't matter, we went to church on Sunday. I was active in our church youth group, and I was known as a prankster who would push any boundary. When we took confirmation classes, I was the one who asked the minister how he knew God was real. I don't remember the answer, but I remember that Reverend Smith answered my question with care and respect. I was on a very meandering faith journey. As a young adult, my wife and I found a Presbyterian church in Baltimore, Maryland. After moving to Maine, we found this church.

Some years we are very active, and other years it just seems like life and work become more of a priority. Even when I am not at church on a Sunday morning, I know the service starts at 9:30. As one famous singer noted "It's a thin line between Saturday night and Sunday morning." However, no matter where I am, I know I believe in the tenets of Christianity. I know I believe that we should treat others the way we want to be treated. I might not even always know where I am on the trail, but I at least know that no matter where I am for the day, the week, the year, or even on my life path, having faith and moving in the right direction is important.

When Troop 200 goes hiking, the first thing we do is plan where we are going to go. We check weather forecasts, get maps, talk about necessary gear and food, and generally try to avoid mistakes and injuries. There is a Yiddish expression that translates to "Man plans, and God laughs." Over the course of last spring and summer, three of our youngest scouts worked to earn the Hiking merit badge. This involved taking four ten-mile hikes, and one twenty-mile hike. Each scout, and the adults that helped them, hiked over 60 miles over the course of a few months. I was on four of the five hikes, and two other leaders were on all five. I think it would be fair to say that not one of those hikes went according to plan. For instance, while hiking at Mt. Blue State Park, we encountered a raging torrent of a stream that we needed to cross. We worked together, and everyone got safely across. That stream was not in our plans. Later that same afternoon we missed a turn on the trail. As a result, we added about two miles to our hike. That was not in our plans. However, the one thing that was constant on all of our hikes was working together as a group and overcoming challenges together. We treated each other with respect, the way we wanted to be treated. We had faith that our preparation would help us safely complete our hike.

If we are fortunate, a trail will be well marked. Often they are marked with paint marks or blazes on trees or rocks, and a specific trail will use the same color for the full length. It is very common to pause

from time to time because we can't see the next blaze. When that happens we slow our pace and proceed with caution. It is rare, but once in a while we will lose the trail entirely. If that happens, we check the map and try to figure out what went wrong. We've never been so lost that we needed to be rescued, but there have been times when doubt has entered my mind. It seems to me that faith can be like that. When everything in our life is going according to plan, it is easy to have faith. But faith is like the map. We can always have it, but the times we need it most is when we are not sure we are on the right trail.

When Troop 200 goes hiking, it is inevitable that some will hike slower or faster than others. We have a hard and fast rule, which is that if you are at the front of the group, you stop whenever you reach a fork in the trail. That ensures we are all on the same trail, and no one gets lost or left behind. We will often check the map to make sure we make the correct turn. It gives us time to drink some water, catch our breath, and, if necessary, redistribute gear. We watch out for one another, and we encourage those who are struggling. Our faith can be like that. Perhaps you have had times when your faith was lagging, and someone gave you a boost at just the right time. Even better, you have probably also given someone a boost along the trail.

I'd like to share one of my favorite poems. This is "The Road Not Taken", by Robert Frost:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,*

*And sorry I could not travel both*

*And be one traveler, long I stood*

*And looked down one as far as I could*

*To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,*

*And having perhaps the better claim,*

*Because it was grassy and wanted wear;*

*Though as for that the passing there*

*Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay*

*In leaves no step had trodden black.*

*Oh, I kept the first for another day!*

*Yet knowing how way leads on to way,*

*I doubted I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

That poem has been read and interpreted so many different ways. In this case I choose to believe that the path the traveler chose was faith, and that is what made the difference for them. Sometimes faith can seem like the harder path. Sometimes it feels like what we see around us calls into question the existence of a God. We see wars around the world. We see an environment increasingly pushed to limits because of human impact on the planet. We see politicians and world leaders make absurd claims and accusations. Perhaps we are in the dark. Perhaps we can't see the next blaze on the rock or tree ahead. Maybe we don't know where we are on our trail. However, we can look at our map. We can find Polaris. Our faith may not tell us where we will end up, but it will ensure we are at least headed in the right direction.

The expression that "Life is a journey, not a destination" has been attributed to the minister Thomas Merton, the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, and even the rock group Aerosmith. I think being a Christian and having faith should be like that. The end, or the destination, is not what is important. What is important is the journey we take along the way. It is important that we help one another. It is important that we try to do our best to leave the world better than we found it. And it is important that we keep our eyes and feet, our hearts and minds, moving in the direction of faith. Amen.