

WHEN LIFE LEADS WHERE WE DO NOT EXPECT

A sermon by James R. Blades
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, California
August 16, 2009
Texts: Genesis 50:7-8, 15-21; Acts 16:1, 6-10

Life does not always deliver to us what we hoped and expected from it nor lead us along the sunlit paths we wanted and wished to travel. Sometimes we find ourselves driven off the Main Street of our dreams by a crisis or unforeseen turn of events, onto a strange and disappointing back road.

In our relationships, in our religious faith, in our health, in our work and career: It happens to all of us sooner or later. “Life,” goes the saying, “is what happens while you’re making other plans.” And so it is.

The Bible is no stranger to this reality. There you find story after story of the great characters of faith who found themselves being led away by life’s circumstances onto some unwanted path. There too you find the unseen presence of One whose grace and mercy, power and guidance is found not only on life’s its sunlit highways but on its shadowy byways too.

Think of Joseph.

Joseph dreamt that he would one day be a man of destiny. But Joseph in his optimistic youth never imagined the twisty back alleys that would take him there. His brothers despised his braggadocious ambitions and sold him a slave into Egypt. There he became a trusted bondsman in Potiphar’s household until Potiphar’s wife falsely accused him and he was thrown into an Egyptian dungeon and forgotten. Everything that happened to Joseph seemed to take him farther and farther from the life he had envisioned.

He could not have known that these devastating detours were really the main road to his destiny: to save the very family that had betrayed him.

“You intended to harm me,” said Joseph to his brothers in end. “But God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the sparing of many lives.”

What a window this one statement is into the vast inscrutable providence of God: That God is able to use even the malevolence of our enemies, even the cruelty of those who would wish us ill, even the most disappointing turn of events, to lead us on to the fulfillment of God's good and gracious purpose for our lives.

And then there was Moses. His dream was to free his Hebrew people from Egyptian bondage. He thought he had the power in his hands to pull it off, an adopted son of Pharaoh, a man of influence and distinction in one of the most powerful nations on earth. One day, Moses stepped out to execute his liberation plan. He killed an Egyptian who was beating one of his Hebrew kin. Moses thought his people would understand that he was their liberator. But they missed the cue.

Moses fled for his life from Pharaoh's justice into the Arabian wilderness. Forty years, he tended sheep there. I wonder how often across those forty years, tending sheep on lonely starlit nights, Moses contemplated his own meteoric demise; how often he regretted that one stupid, arrogant, impetuous act that instantly turned him from a man of honor and power, into, of all things, a shabby shepherd which, in his Egyptian mindset, was the lowest livelihood on earth.

Maybe some of us can relate to Moses' disappointment. For, to be honest, some of the unhappy side roads we've found ourselves on are the result of our own ill-advised or impetuous choices.

Moses might well have imagined that it was all over for him. Little did he realize that those years of lonely desert exile were very part of God's training program for what was later to come.

And what did Moses learn on his desert detour? Well, first of all, if Moses were going to be any use to God, he was going to have to be cured of the idea that he could do God's work and save God's people by his own wit and ingenuity. He was going to have to learn to depend on God to do God's work. Humility was the lesson Moses had to learn on his detour. And it is a lesson we must all learn if we are to be most effective in the work that God has for us to do.

Here's another character whose story reminds us of blessings to be found along life's unwanted detours. Her name is Naomi. Her story is in the Old Testament book of Ruth.

A great famine had come to the land of Judah. Naomi and her two sons were taken by her husband to the foreign land of Moab where times are supposedly better. But there in Moab Naomi's husband dies. Her two sons who have taken Moabite wives, also die. And here is Naomi, stranded in an foreign land with no husband and no sons; only two Moabite daughters-in-law. To say nothing of the fact that Moab was a hateful country to the Hebrews, a woman in any country of that day without a husband or sons was in a dire way. In her utter destitution, Naomi decides to return to her Hebrew home and kin.

“Don't call me Naomi,” she laments. “Call me bitter. I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty.” Talk about finding yourself at the end of a mistaken path!

If you happen to be familiar with this story, I have a pop quiz for you: What gift did Naomi find on her detour? What special blessing did Naomi discover on her path of disappointment? I'll give you a clue: Emerson called this gift “the masterpiece of nature.” It was the gift of a faithful friend. The friend's name was Ruth.

Ruth's words of friendship to Naomi are among the sublimest in all of Scripture:

“Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”

Where do you find a friend like that? Well, not usually while you're sauntering along the life's happy highway. No, it's when life gets hard and tough that our real friends show up. Anyone can walk with you in the sunshine. It's when you're down or out or lost or sick when a faithful friend becomes one of the most precious gifts on earth.

Some years ago, a friend of mine named Ilene was diagnosed with breast cancer. The prognosis was very iffy, because it had spread into her lymphatic system. Cancer was not in Ilene's plans or dreams. Neither was a full year of chemo therapy followed by radiation. After it was all over, I asked Ilene if there were any unexpected gifts she discovered on this terrible detour. She said there weren't many. But there were two very evident ones she could think of: First, the special sense of God's strengthening comfort;

and second, the deep and abiding affection of her friends. Never before her illness had she ever experienced such depth and breadth of love of family and friends and church.

Think about it: how many of your deepest and most abiding friendships have come to you on the paths of pain that you would never have chosen? Friendships that you might never otherwise have sought or found.

We have yet one more story to tell of unexpected guidance on life's unchosen paths. An incident recounted in Whitney's reading of the Book of Acts this morning that occurred on Paul's second missionary journey. Acts 16, starting with verse 7.

“When they came to the border of Mysia, they *kept trying* to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.”

One of Paul's great ambitions was to go to Bithynia. And no wonder, for it was “one of the richest provinces in Asia Minor...to have carried Christianity there would have been a triumph indeed.”ⁱ

Paul tried very hard to get into Bithynia, for Paul was never a “half-measure” sort of guy. But something blocked his way, repeatedly. We're not told what.

So instead of going to his wished-for Bithynia, Paul ended up detouring to Troas. It was there in Troas, that Paul had a vision of a man begging him to bring the Christian message to Macedonia. Paul obeyed the dream and went.

You would never guess from the Bible's short mention of this string of events that they were pivotal in their significance for human history. For it was this detour through Troas that first carried Christianity onto the European Continent. It was Paul's disappointed ambition, his frustrated dream that led him into the most historic venture of his career.

Last spring, someone, I can't remember who, recommended to me this book: *Three Cups of Tea*,¹ a fascinating true story of a son of a guy named Greg Mortensen.

Mountain climbing was Mortenson's passion; mastering the world's highest peaks was what he lived and breathed for. In 1993, after a failed attempt to climb K2, the second highest peak in the world, Mortenson got lost coming down. Frostbitten and

¹ Greg Mortenson & David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

malnourished, he drifted into a remote and impoverished Pakistani village in the Karakoram Mountains. There he was received with the most gracious hospitality and nursed back to health. He noticed there were no schools for the children in the village and, in gratitude for all the kindness they had shown him, he vowed to return to build them a school. They didn't expect him to return, but one day, after the trying task of raising funds in the U.S., he showed up to fulfill his promise. While building their school, other villages began to approach him about doing the same for them. To make a long story short, Mortenson's unhappy detour from the peak of his failure became the path to his true calling: At last count, he has built more than 80 schools in impoverished villages across Pakistan and Afghanistan, and he is still building.

Sometimes our unwanted paths lead to our life's better calling. Sometimes the disappointments we would rather have avoided become the bridge to a more effective career or relationship or lifestyle. Sometimes it is the challenge we find on one of life's detours that draws forth from us strengths and talents and empathies and passions we never otherwise may have discovered. Sometimes it is on that long walk down from our disappointed dreamed-of summit that we find the trail of our truer potential.

All of us sooner or later have our unwanted detours. Some of us are on a detour somewhere in our lives this morning: in our career or relationships or health or faith.

I will not say that God deliberately leads us on life's harsh and disappointing paths. I will not say it was God's will for Joseph's brothers to betray him, or that it was God's will for Moses to carry out his impetuously murderous act, or that it was God's will for Naomi's husband and sons to die leaving her destitute in a foreign land; but this I will say: that as long as we are willing to seek God's guidance and never give up, God is able to redeem our paths and not only to redeem them but to make us better because of them.

"For I know the plans that I have for you," said God through the prophet Jeremiah to the disheartened Hebrew exiles; "plans for your welfare and not for your calamity, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call on Me and come and pray to Me and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with your whole heart" (Jeremiah 29:11-13).

ⁱ From Harry Emerson Fosdick's sermon, "Handling Life's Second Bests." Harper & Row, 1935.