

Have you ever been driving down the road having a lovely day and then you see the dreaded sign...“detour”? Some detours are not a big deal and are short as we go around construction work or a road crew, but other detours can be long taking us places we have never been before. You cannot plan for a detour. And so, it is with life.

So often we have a plan. We know where we want to go, but life has its own way of taking us on expected detours. Maybe this is true for your life. Perhaps you created a trajectory for yourself and now you find yourself on a completely different one.

In life, we all experience detours. This even happens in our faith journeys. Our relationship with God can be going along great and then something happens that we don't understand. We question God. We ask “Why?” We want to understand God's will for our lives, but so often we are left with more questions than answers.

This experience is not unique to us, we share it with many people in the Bible. In the book of Exodus, we see that Moses and the Israelites encountered detour after detour as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years on their way to the Promised Land.

Detour 1: Red Sea

When over 600 chariots with the Egyptian army were advancing towards the Israelites God made a way for the Israelites to go forward through the parting of the Red Sea. God saved their lives.

Detour 2: No food.

When the Israelites were complaining about not having food in the wilderness God made manna rain down from heaven and provided them delicious meat from quails.

Detour 3: No water.

When there was no water in the wilderness, Moses hit his staff against the rock and water poured forth.

Every time the Israelites thought they were going to die or had to go a different way God provided direction and salvation.

We see this again in Genesis in the story of Hagar and Ishmael.

We remember that Hagar, was a slave given to Abraham by his wife Sarah to have children with since she could not have children of her own. But once Sarah had Isaac she was worried about Hagar’s son inheriting everything since he was the first born.

So, Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. When we meet Hagar in this place in the Bible, it seems that she had made her peace with certain death. She had run out of water and even placed her child, Ishmael, away from her so she would not have to watch him die. She could not bear it. She cried out to God, and God responded and saved her life and the life of her child and made of them a new nation.

Time and time again God brings new life out of what we think is certain death. We see this in the New Testament through the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul.

Today we continue our fourth week in our six-week sermon series “Which Way, Lord?” about the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul.

Throughout Scripture we see that Paul went on many missionary journeys sharing about the Gospel of Jesus Christ to countless people. Many places were not receptive of his mission. On many occasions he found himself harmed and imprisoned. Yet, God preserved his life and guided him forward.

On one particular journey, Paul was going to Bithynia. In his book “Which Way, Lord?” Rob Fuquay tells us Paul wanted to go there because he believed that it would be an easier trip.ⁱ Historians tells us that “Christianity was thriving in the cities and outlying areas.”ⁱⁱⁱ Paul was probably excited as he began this journey knowing that his message about the good news of Jesus Christ would be received well and he would not get injured.

However, as Paul was making his way to Bithynia the Bible tells us that “the Spirit of Jesus did not allow [him]” to go to this place.ⁱⁱⁱ But why would God not allow Paul to go to this place to further God’s kingdom?

Later that night we find out why. As he slept that evening Paul had a vision. He saw a man who pleaded with him and said: “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”^{iv} This vision is what spurred Paul to go to Macedonia and to evangelize for the first time to the European continent, making a much bigger impact than he would have made just by going to Bithynia.^v

This is why Paul could say with confidence the words from Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Time and time again God showed Paul that God had a plan and a purpose for Paul’s life even when he did not understand.

Like Paul, we too are called to be open to go a different way than we planned for all for God’s glory. This also means that we are called to change our outlook and attitude towards God.

Instead of looking at something that does not work out the way we would have liked as a closed door, we need to look at it as a new opportunity. Fuquay encourages us: **“As [we] seek to follow God’s direction for [our lives], trust that [we] are never beyond God’s ability to guide.”**^{vi}

No matter what decisions we make in this life, God can continue to guide us forward into new life if only we trust in God.

In order to be guided by God, we must first open the door to Jesus Christ. Just as the Apostle Paul had a vision on where to go next for God’s glory, John also had a vision which is shared in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 3:20 we hear the words from Christ: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you, and you with me.”

When we open our hearts to the Lord, the Holy Spirit comes in and starts directing us on which way to go.

Like the Israelites, the disciples tried to control the places that Jesus went. They would tell him to go another way if things became too dangerous. They tried to remove children from his path, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me” (Matthew 19:14). They told Jesus not to talk to the Samaritan women, but he offered her living water. They told him that Lazarus was dying and he not them not to worry.

Like the disciples we too ask Christ to call us to an easier road. It is hard for us to follow Christ in the detours of life and yet, this is where God forms and fashions us in our discipleship.

In our Gospel lesson from Matthew today we hear Christ call the disciples into a life of mission. He calls them the “salt of the earth” the “light of the world” and “a city on a hill” (Matthew 5:13-20).

He calls them salt because this reference would be meaningful to them.

Commentary tells us that “eating together was called ‘sharing salt’ and expressed a binding relationship.”^{vii} By calling them the “salt of the earth” Jesus is encouraging them to preserve their faith by abiding in the covenant they had entered into with God.

Jesus calls his disciples “the light of the world.” Through their discipleship they will illumine the way for others to find Jesus Christ. Christ calls them “a city on a hill” to remind them that others will look to them to understand who Christ is so they cannot lose sight of what God is calling them to do.

Jesus encouraged the disciples in these ways because he knew that they too would face detours along the way.

I don’t know about you, but in my life I have experienced many detours. One of which happened when I was appointed to my first church. I interviewed at seven United Methodist Churches before I found out my appointment. Some felt like better fits than others. I felt the most at home at Braddock Street United Methodist in Winchester, Virginia. I was sure I would be appointed there.

So imagine my surprise when I was sent to Warwick Memorial United Methodist Church in Newport News, Virginia. The reason I did not have this church at the top of my list was that I knew there was a lot of work to be done as they wanted to start a new worship service that had failed seven times before. I did not want to take that on in my first year of ministry and yet, that is exactly what God called me to do.

Wouldn’t you know when I was discussing the birth of this new service with the congregation we decided to pray for God to give us a Scripture upon which to found the service. Two weeks later, many of us felt God calling us to our very gospel lesson for today. So, we decided that the service would be called “The Lampstand” and our hope for the service is that it would illumine Jesus Christ so that people without a church home would find that they had a new place to belong.

I was blessed to be a part of starting this new service and it remains strong today. Not because of me, but because of God working through the amazing congregation there. People who have not lost their salty faith because they believe God is still calling us to illumine the lives of those who are lost and to share with them Jesus Christ.

Last week my friend Peggy, who is now a pastor there, invited me to come back and preach at their Pentecost service. In this moment I felt that things had come full circle for me.

Sometimes it is only in hindsight that we see God was and is at work all along. It was on this perceived detour of my life that God formed and fashioned me into the pastor I am today. I am so thankful that my first four years in ministry were at that church.

Time and time again in my life God has shown me that God’s plans are far better than my own.

The good news for our lives today is that God continues to lead us forward into mission even in the detours of our lives. May we not be afraid to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit even if it is into uncharted territory. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Rob Fuquay. “Which Way, Lord?” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2018. P. 70.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. P. 71. & Acts 16:7-8.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid. P. 72.

^{vi} Ibid. P. 77.

^{vii} “The New Interpreters Biblical Commentary.” Vol. III. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 181.