

The Practice of Getting Lost

Exodus 16:1-17

July 25th, 2020

I remember the first time I had a car that had built-in GPS mapping. It was many years ago when GPS was the new big thing, and we were in Italy on sabbatical leave. We leased a new small Peugeot that came fully-loaded, and that included a built-in GPS. Marla, a traditionalist, told me not to bother and to use a map. So I reminded her of another time when we were in Italy using a map, and how often we found ourselves hopelessly lost on the backroads of Tuscany.

I figured that the attractive French voice of Eloise that came out of our dash would soon become our helpful companion. Then we were riding down the autostrada from the airport in Rome and, unexpectedly, Eloise tells me to take the next exit right. Marla told me that Eloise, even if she is French, is a bit of an idiot. I exited, and we soon found ourselves touring the cloverleaf ramp of the autostrada. I tried hard not to be annoyed by the smirk on Marla's face. Some weeks later, Marla said I should look at the map for our day trip up into the hills of Umbria. But who needs a map when you've got Eloise to get you there? The next thing I know is that we are driving down a dirt road waving embarrassingly to the farmer and his family as we drive through his field.

We do not like to find ourselves lost, especially in an unknown foreign land where we do not know anyone and don't speak the language. It is no wonder GPS has become so popular and made us so dependent on it. I have noticed that even Marla, on occasion, will use the GPS on her phone. (I think it is some guy with a honey-coated voice that she listens to.) We have become so dependent on GPS that I wonder now if we have lost our innate ability to find our way when we are lost.

It is the same in life as in traveling. We do not want to get lost and have to endure the confusion of not knowing which way we are going. It is a frightful time when you realize you have lost your way, and you have not the slightest idea about which way to go. So much can go wrong in this life. We can have a failure that comes with painful consequences. We go through unexpected losses or changes and have to redefine ourselves. Assumptions we made about God and faith, ourselves and people we thought we knew, can be challenged. Then we are no longer sure what to think.

We are tempted to rush to rescue our children from the unsettling and scary experience of not knowing where they are going. If we could, we would always make sure we have downloaded into them an up-to-date version of precise instructions for finding their way. But, of course, we cannot do that. Some things are only learned by failure, confusion, and having to figure things out for ourselves. Both parents and children have to learn to be in times of being lost.

This morning we have read scripture that comes to us about a people who are wandering and feeling lost. The people of Israel have been miraculously delivered by God from bondage and slavery in Egypt. But now on the other side of the Red Sea, they

find themselves wandering in the wilderness. As bad as life was before the parting of the Red Sea and their escape, they now wonder if times then were better than wandering aimlessly in the harsh and unforgiving wilderness. We will remember that this is a sizable army of people used to living in an urban environment with modern conveniences, and now they are on a permanent camping trip without even the basics. Where is the food coming from? How about water in this parched land?

This time of being lost, of being in the wilderness, will take the Hebrew people on one wild journey with each other and their God. The Exodus has a forty-year exit before they find themselves in the Promised Land drinking milk and eating honey. That it is a hard time for them is an understatement. It is not like one of those survival reality shows without the knowledge that there is a rescue team that is on the ready or that anyone can simply say, "I'm done," and go home.

If you did not have trust issues before, you sure have them now. Can we depend on Moses? Sure he was a good negotiator with Pharaoh, but how good is he now as an administrator who can organize and guide our way out of this hostile land? "Yes, we thought we were goners back there at the Red Sea, and God came through in a big way for us, but now every day we have to wake up and know there will be food on the table and water to drink and protection from the wild beast and any hostile nomads we might run into."

The Hebrew people - like all of us - failed miserably when it came to trusting God to provide for them. There is a reason that God does not take them in a straight line to the Promised Land. For forty years, they wandered. Forty years is also a code for dividing the beginning of one period of time from another very different time. There was a time of deliverance, now a time of preparation, and then a time to be given the Promised Land. A time of being lost, of learning to trust, of learning how to be in community with one another, and to develop trust in the God who guides us was required.

Hopefully, there are, for all of us, times when we will have the opportunity of being lost. This is most easily done when it is something we chose rather than something that happens to us. It is best when we approach times of being lost with a sense of adventure. I remember one day in my life when I was in Rome on Sabbatical alone. I decided I would plan nothing for that day. Rather than having a tour booked and a schedule planned, I decided simply to walk outside my hotel room and go where the spirit leads. There is a French term for this. It is called "flaneur" (flan-nur). It is when you go on an aimless walk without any destination.

That is what I did that day. I found myself in an obscure part of town where early Christians often lived. I ventured into a church whose basement was covered in ancient early-Christian artwork that I had no idea existed. I found myself in a rundown pizza parlor with tables crammed next to each other and the best pizza that I have ever put in my mouth, and had a great conversation with an American student. I wandered into the Jewish Quarter by accident and learned the dark history of Jews in the city. By the afternoon, I was beginning to wish I had some direction about where to eat and was

wishing I had brought my Rick Steves guide book. The very moment I was thinking that, I looked up and to my shock, there was Rick Steves himself filming his next video for PBS, and he put me in the film window shopping. So taken was I by the moment, I completely forgot to ask him where to eat...which was a blessing. I simply followed my nose to a shop of homemade bread and then to a cheese shop, and then I walked into a food store where I tasted many of Rome's most unique dishes.

I learned much from doing this:

- For one, I learned that no matter how lost I was, there was always a way out.
- I learned that not having it all figured out meant I was open to being surprised by something new.
- I learned I could figure my way out and grew confident in myself to take care of myself.
- But more importantly, I learned it is ok to ask for directions. Being that I am a guy, I know this will surprise many of you but it is true: It is ok to admit to another human being that you do not have the foggiest idea about where you are and you need some help. As Dumbledore says to Harry Potter, "Help will always be given at Hogwarts, Harry, to those who ask for it."

Then there are those times when you do not choose to get lost: You get fired from a job, your spouse betrays you, your child has a deadly disease. No one recommends the practice of getting lost if this is what it means. You will find yourself initially spending a lot of time wishing you were anywhere but where you are. You may bargain, plead, and beg for things to be different. You may rage against life or God for what has happened. Years may pass, and you find yourself as stuck as you ever were in a place you did not ask to be. Then, if you are fortunate, you will have someone tell you what someone told me when I was lost in a place not of my choosing: "When you can finally fully accept where you are, then and only then will you find a way forward." Sometimes we have to buckle ourselves in for the ride and let life take us where it is going. Consenting to what is going on becomes your choice. Then you start to explore the possibility that life is for you and not against you. Then you can explore the possibility that you will be given what you need each day.

Of course, that is what happened to the people of Israel. Early on, they found themselves in the wilderness, terrified they will not have food to eat, and desperately wishing they were anywhere but here. But they cried out, and God does not condemn them for crying out. Instead, God tells Moses that each day is a new day. Each day they are to go out, and they will discover a white substance that will be their daily bread. They are to only gather what they need.

Remarkably, it was just as God said. If they gathered too much or gathered too little, everyone found they had only as much as then needed. If they collected too much and tried to save it, it would be rotten the next day. In other words, they had to learn to trust that each day God would provide what was needed. Like a mother who responds to the needs of her infant child, God would provide just what was needed, and the newbies

of the Hebrew people were learning to build that basic sense of trust that would enable them to live in the Promised Land.

It does not take much imagination for us to understand that right now - we as a people and a nation are in a time of wilderness. We can spend our time wishing we were anywhere but here. Or we can learn to learn from our Hebrew ancestors that a radical sense of trust that God will provide what is needed if we only ask.
Amen.