

Intro into our series:

For Lent we are traveling together on a journey, just as we remember Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross. We've talked about how we must journey down from the mountaintop experiences into the ordinary parts of our lives. And last week we discussed the importance of prayer to our spiritual journeys. That our lives must have an upward posture, an awakening to God's presence with us.

Today, we look at the waywardness of our journeys. That inevitably we lose our way, even when we're trying to keep up with the Christ.

There are plenty of texts to choose from when we consider being lost. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son. For us this morning, we'll home in on the wandering people of God in the wilderness, in Exodus and in John's Gospel.

There's something very much at the core of our humanity, thinking of life as a journey and the inevitability of our getting lost.

Consider this study from 2010 by a British insurance company. They found that only 26% of men would stop and ask for directions within the first half hour of being lost.

They calculated the cost to the men at nearly \$3000 in wasted gas over their lifetimes.¹ Annually, men are lost on average, 276 additional miles, and women 256 miles. When I'm justifying my stubbornness in the middle of being lost, I like to say, "Ah, it's like we're on a safari. It'll be an adventure. It's about the journey anyway, not the destination, right?" Some think it's evolutionary: after all, stopping to ask for directions in prehistoric times meant you might be eaten by a saber-toothed tiger. Now it's mostly a bruised ego.

Yet this seems to be a habit we carry over into our spiritual journeys, as well. We don't like to stop and ask for direction when we're feeling a bit lost. We kind of make it up as we go. We tell ourselves we deserve it because we must've done something wrong, as if being unhappy in your career choice is the equivalent of robbing a bank. Maybe we think it is God's will for us to feel miserable and lost, as if God revels in causing a little girl to go blind and deaf before her 2nd birthday. Maybe our situations are too painful, or too

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<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1304639/The-276-mile-price-men-pay-asking-directions.html>

The Journey Wayward

Exodus 16; John 6

Brent Newberry

February 21, 2016
Second Sunday of Lent

embarrassing, so we wander through it feeling fearful and ashamed, as if depression or being bullied are things to be ashamed of.

EXODUS TEXT

The people of God are wandering in the wilderness, they have left Egypt and have hauled all they can carry into the desert following a man they don't know, to a place they haven't heard of. They come up against obstacle after obstacle, their journey wearying, their spirits battered, their doubts enraged. This story we read, isn't the end of it all. They'll wander some more, for many years, before arriving in the Promised Land.

They'd lose love ones. They lost their homes. In many ways all they had before them, was the back of Moses' head, and a fading hope for something more. And as they continued their trek, and the weeks turned to years, we can interpret stories like this one to be the Hebrew translation for "Are we there yet?"

So God says "not yet," and gives them bread, and they say "ew, what is it?" and they call it manna. And then God says, "fine, here are some birds too." And they go back to whining about when they'll get there, wherever there is, because

they don't even know, and God continues to show them that life isn't about the ending, it's about the journey.

Along their entire way, God was before them, with them, providing for them. It may not have been what they had expected or even wanted, but in the middle of nowhere, in the midst of the wilderness, to God, they were never lost.

JOHN TEXT

It's the same with the people in John's Gospel. They wander around, with a herd mentality, following this charismatic leader, getting so caught up in following that they forget to pack enough food for the journey. And they wind up hungry, or as we say these days, hangry—hungry and angry—and the disciples aren't sure what to do. They seem as lost as the people in some ways.

And yet in the middle of the confusion and the doubts, there is the Son of God, with them all the same, unwilling to leave them to their own devices, unrelenting in his compassion. So he provides for them. And in a revealing moment, we see in verse 12 that Jesus instructs the disciples to gather up the leftovers, so that nothing may be lost. For Jesus, nothing is lost.

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Not a multitude of starving people, not families who are wracked with pain and fears, not even leftover bread. Nothing, no one is lost to God.

MIKE SCROGIN

At some point we got it in our heads that the straighter the path, the more God must be involved. That the straighter the better, the easier, for our faith journeys. That wandering means wayward, means disobedience or ungodliness. So that when twists and turns, and peaks and valleys come our way, we feel not simply lost, but guilty, or abandoned. Much like the Israelites.

MIKE SCROGIN

Our church knows a lot about those feelings. If not guilt, at least lost or abandoned. It happens anytime you transition through the loss of a pastor and wander through the intermediate time, waiting and wondering when things will go back on course.

Except this church learned a long time ago, that it's not about some end in mind, but that God continues to work and be present even through the unknown, that the journey is what makes us, shapes us, draws us closer to each other and compels us to look to God.

Through this recent pastoral transition, you've practiced this. And in previous transitions, too. Some more painful than others, more challenging than others. Maybe none more so than when Mike Scrogin passed away during his tenure here. A dynamic and loving pastor, devoted to the work of God with you together, and his life ended all too soon. And in the aftermath, as those weeks turned to years, you wondered how long you'd have to wander through the wilderness of your grief. And maybe you didn't have the space or the time to really grieve or grieve well, you had a church to run, a job to do. But if you'd had the time, perhaps you'd wonder where God was, or what you did to deserve this, or why God did it, or why God had forsaken you.

And I'd say that all of those are human questions, real questions, legitimate even if they don't follow rationally or theologically.

You experienced real loss each time a pastor left, but none more so than when Mike left, and with it came a sense of being lost.

But what I've learned from many of you, seen in many of your stories and lives, is that this church is courageous and resilient and

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faithful. You continued to follow the Spirit. Even in the wilderness of Mike's death. You remembered even in the painful uncertainty, in that unknown future, somewhere deep within you, you knew that God was with you, that in fact God had not abandoned you. That you were not lost to God. You pushed through, you pressed on, and all these years later, here you are doing it again.

Here *we* are. In a new chapter of the same journey. One that will continue to hand us our fair share of surprises and pains and fears and doubts. But we get to do it together. Still. We are not alone.

WILD GOOSE

There's an old Celtic image for God. We think of the Holy Spirit as a dove, we see it in different passages in the Scriptures. The Celtic people thought of the Spirit as a Wild Goose. Unpredictable and wild, conjuring up images of a wild goose chase. Like the Hebrew word for Spirit and breath and wind, this imagery reminds us to expect the unexpected. And yet it also reminds us to never forget, that we are not alone on this journey of following God. And that with all the peaks and valleys, all the twists and turns, we press on. We wander through that wilderness as wayward as it may

feel, and we find the God who leads us through it all. Like a beacon of hope. It may feel like a wild goose chase, but we follow hard after the God who finds us, with whom we are never lost.

So when you're feeling lost, remember that you're not alone. God is right there with you in the middle of your broken marriage. In the depths of your grief over the loss of your wife. In the midst of your fears with your new diagnosis. Remember you are not alone.

The season of Lent lends itself to a time of reflection, of introspection, of confession and even an acknowledgement of the shadows and grief we all know too well. It reminds us how fragile and finite we all are, that from dust we came and to dust we shall return.

But we have the choice to remember that dust also floats on the wind, the same wind that carries the goose and the dove and all who dare to wander.

So don't be afraid to stop and ask for directions once in awhile.

Because not all who wander are lost.²

² J.R.R. Tolkien.

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Most certainly not to God.

Amen.