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Road Trip! Great Journeys in the Bible XI. Travel Tips

Isaiah 55:1-3, 12-13 The Message Hey there! All who are thirsty, come to the water! Are you penniless? Come anyway-buy and eat! Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk. Buy without money-everything's free! Why do you spend your money on junk food, your hard-earned cash on cotton candy? Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best, fill yourself with only the finest. Pay attention, come close now, listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words. I'm making a lasting covenant commitment with you, the same that I made with David: sure, solid, enduring love.... So you'll go out in joy, you'll be led into a whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause. No more thistles, but giant sequoias, no more thorn bushes, but stately pines-Monuments to me, to God, living and lasting evidence of God.

Like many Americans, we've spent our summer traveling. Our travels, of course, were not by plane or car but have been through a look at some of the "great journeys" in the Bible. We've looked at ten scriptures that make reference to travel or a journey or a new direction. We opened up with the Book of Genesis and followed this motif all the way through to the Book of Revelation. And, of course, we've only touched on a tiny portion of the scriptures we *could* have delved into, because this metaphor, this image of life as a journey can be found in hundreds of scriptures in the Bible. At the beginning of this sermon series, way back on May 31, I said this:

...the motif of "the journey" is one that can be found in most every book in the Bible, and, as with so many of the trips you and I have taken, those journeys can help illuminate important things about our lives and they can sometimes help us change our lives. The clarity of travel can help us see new things and understand in new ways.¹

And so for this eleventh and final sermon of this series, I want to take my cue from that

¹http://firstchristiancos.org/library/sermons/sermons2015/5-31-15_Road_Trip_Sin_Adam_and_Eve.pdf

sentence and ask what we have learned about ourselves, about God, about Church that we can keep in mind as our life's journey continues. Let's then seek to summarize a few lessons from all our travels, some "travel tips" for this journey that we call our Christian lives.

Tip #1. Take a map. Whether it's paper map from AAA, all fresh and folded and crinkly, or a GPS, or a your phone's map app, take a map. Have some idea of the territory that you are going to be headed through and the best ways to get to where you are going. Your map or map app can help you know the way to go whether you want to go the slow and scenic route or the fastest "we're making good time" route. For the reality is that *any* map is actually simply the distilled and collected experience of all those travelers who have traveled these parts before you. Have you ever thought about maps that way? A maps is simply a collection of so many other travelers' experiences about how to get somewhere. The 1957 map of Colorado that I recently saw was a good guide *then* for how to get from the Springs to Denver, but if you tried to use that map *now* you'd find yourself on a dead-end road just north of Monument. Maps continue to evolve as they collect and collate the wisdom of what routes are available for a particular journey.

It's the same with life. You simply won't live your life as well as you could, you won't journey as well as you could, if you don't take along with you the experiences of others who have been this way before. That's one of the best things about the church, isn't it? Oh, we have our foibles and failings, and we sometimes squabble about silly things, but at its best the church is a kind of living map, reminding you that when you pass through both the valley of the shadows and the mountaintops of joy, that others have been this way before and can help you know the way to go – and can remind you in your journey's hardest moments that you will get there despite the detours and the roadblocks. So, travel tip #1 is indeed to take with you on your journey the collective

wisdom and strength that your fellow Christian travelers have for you. Take a map.

Travel tip #2. Ignore the map sometimes. But sometimes too *much* focusing on the map means that you will miss charm and spontaneity and grace that happens when you are not expecting it. When Barbara and I lived in Hawaii, we used to see many tourists who were so armed with their maps and their guidebooks, who were so very well prepared – often with sightseeing itineraries that listed landmarks by the minute – that they often missed the best things that were right in front of their eyes, or that they might have seen if they'd ventured down an un-mapped road or stopped at a little local restaurant that had no Yelp reviews. As John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens to you when you are busy making plans." But it may *not* happen to you if you are overly obsessed with the map. For, as I say, you can thereby miss some amazing things that a little more spontaneity might have disclosed. As novelist and poet Alice Walker says, it frustrates *"God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. People think pleasing God is all God cares about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back."* In other words, the collective wisdom embodied in maps can be helpful in so many ways, but **over**-dependence on them can also erode your ability to notice your life – to see the things of unexpected beauty, to become aware of the unexpected opportunities to serve your fellow human beings, to realize that sometimes instead of following the map you need to blaze a trail.

For, you see, sometimes that collective wisdom embodied in your map is just plain wrong. After all, the "map" that Americans collectively held in their hands up until 1861 said that slavery was acceptable and even justified by the Bible. But thanks be to God that folks like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas and Harriet Beecher Stowe put down that map and decided under the promptings and lure of God's love for each and all to go a different way – and in the process thereby created **new** maps and **new** wisdom and **new** hope. The trails that God may be calling *you* to blaze in order that

your life might be more purposive, more beautiful, more fulfilled may well indeed lie off the map that parents, family, society have given to you. So, ask yourself: where do you need to **ignore** that map and go a different way?

Tip #3. But take the *right* map. I've shared with you from time to time about my annual road trips with my friend Bob. One of those trips was over territory that was new to us in Arizona and New Mexico, and in preparation I had ordered a map packet from AAA. But as we started out our journey, Bob opened the packet only to find that AAA had sent me maps for Louisiana and Alabama. That was less than helpful. What maps are you or I carrying that are less than helpful for our journeys as Christians? Is your map inked with the colors of suspicion or fear? Or, in the face of scripture's clear commandment that "When an alien resides with you in your land... [he] shall be to you as the citizen among you [and] you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33-35) is your map penned instead in the hues of xenophobia? Do you take your direction from the meanest voices around us instead of from the voice of our Savior whose earthly parents had to flee oppression and were welcomed in a land not their own? Is your map more walls than bridges, forgetting that the Apostle Paul reminded us that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for **all...** are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28)? Do you carry in your pocket a map that's shaded in the gray hues of self-doubt or the nurturing of an old resentment such that your map never seems to lead you in new directions and you spend too many nights playing the what-if game? If any of these are you, then my travel tip for you today is for you to seek get a new map!

Tip #4. Ask for directions. We sometimes like to think of ourselves as self-made, self-reliant, self-contained. We may like to think that we don't need help, don't need directions. But that is not true. We are who we are because of the *love* of so many others, love that we neither deserved because of what we did or did not do.

Think of the teachers you have had who showed you who to be and what to do. Think of those who loved you into life. Think of those who stood beside you when you were more petty than pretty, more grumbling than gracious, more sorry than saintly. Willie Nelson once wrote a song entitled "*The Most Unoriginal Sin*,"² and part of what we need to be reminded of is that we are indeed neither alone nor original in our sins and shortcomings and in the ways we manage to get ourselves lost on our journeys. It can be a hopeful comfort to be reminded that others share our condition, that what we have done and messed up others have also done and messed up too! In other words, sometimes we indeed need to ask for directions because others have passed this way before, others have learned from their experiences, others have found a way forward even in the midst of things that we may wonder how we'll ever get past. So, don't be shy about asking for directions, asking for help, asking for counsel. There is a great deal of wisdom in this room that is yours for the asking.

Tip #5. Give Good Directions - Pay It Forward. I'm often bemused and occasionally aggravated by how so many people can't seem to give good directions. In Indiana, I once was given directions to "*turn right at what was the Jones' place before the Smiths bought it and it burned down.*" And even our map apps fail us sometimes in this regard. Google Maps insists that the Pikes Peak Cog Railway begins in Susan Griswold's driveway. Google Maps also once sent Bob and me on a journey from El Paso to near Alamogordo that ended up taking us on a hundred miles of dirt road and which deposited us into an area where there was this welcoming sign to greet us "*Warning: Do Not Leave Vehicle. Live Ammunition Being Fired Overhead.*" Sometimes the reason that we don't give good directions is that we are afraid of hurting someone. You know what I'm talking about. You have this friend who has some of the most

²<http://www.metrolyrics.com/most-unoriginal-sin-lyrics-willie-nelson.html> for lyrics. Audio at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16llaRWTgQw>

crazy, self-deluded, even sometimes self-destructive ideas, and when she or he asks you for your opinion, you decide to not offer your real thoughts, to not give good directions, because you want to be “nice.” But you see, here’s the thing: the Christian faith is not about “niceness.” Oh, being nice is generally better than being a jerk. But Jesus had nothing to say about niceness when He was giving us the directions for our journeys. No, he said nothing about the “nice” life but lots about the faithful life – and such a life consists in serving others, in sometimes taking up one’s cross, in being the advocate for the marginalized and the vulnerable. But such a life will also indeed be blessed, and I hope that every one of us in this room has known moments of such blessedness. And then share what you know about that; give good directions to someone who is lost.

Finally, what journey would be complete without music. We currently call them iPods and playlists; a previous generation called them Walkmans and mix tapes; a generation before that called them A.M. radios. And the Hebrew people, there in Babylon, having endured seventy years of slavery, were on the verge of their own road trip, their own journey, on the verge of finally going home. And God announced to them that their journey would also be accompanied by the most glorious of music. Did you hear it: *“...you’ll go out in joy.... The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause.”* And God even wants them to eat well – and, after all, what road trip would be complete without trip food? Here is God’s version of trip food as spoken by the prophet: *“Come... and eat! Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk. Buy without money-everything’s free! Why do you spend your money on junk food, your hard-earned cash on cotton candy? Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best, fill yourself with only the finest.”* And while I happen to like cotton candy, I’ll admit that it

isn't a great source of strength for the journey. Why the songs and why such provisioning from God for their journey? Well, it's found in a little phrase in the middle of our scripture: What God wants for those Hebrew people, for you and for me, is "*a whole and complete life.*" **A whole and complete life.** That's not always a nice life, it's not always a happy life, but what God wants, as the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell puts it in a phrase I've shared with you before but which is so on-target, is for you to know that you have, *under* God, a **purpose** for your life and you have, *from* God, a **promise** for your life – a promise of life abundant and everlasting. But on the Hebrew people's journey, on your journey and mine, none of that would be possible despite the best travel tips we can compile, despite the best maps we can buy, if it weren't for that good news that God tells the Hebrew people there at the beginning of their journey home: "*I'm making a lasting covenant commitment with you, the same that I made with David: sure, solid, enduring love.*" **Sure, solid, enduring love.** Love that will not let us go no matter how we may meander, no matter in what ways we are lost. Love that always calls us forward to new life and transformation. Love that revels in and always offers hope. *Sure, solid, enduring love.* Love that is always with you no matter where you go.

And that is the best travel tip of all!