

“The Gift of Getting Lost”

March 11, 2018

Gifts of the Dark Wood series – 4th Sunday in Lent

I often wonder what I did before GPS. I rely on it so much to get me where I’m going. As long as I have an address, I can find anyone’s home, which helps when you go to unfamiliar places. GPS isn’t perfect, but it’s a great help. To know where I am and where I’m going is a wonderful thing, and I depend on it.

But there are those moments when GPS can’t help. No signal, no connection, and no direction. I found myself lost in the woods near Rockford one afternoon (almost at dusk, of course!). I had visited a fellow pastor at her family cottage near an inland lake, and when I needed to leave, another car was blocking the way that I had come in. *I’ll just take this other path; I’m sure it leads out to the main road...*

Well, it didn’t. With no good markers and no good GPS signal, it didn’t take long. I was lost. I managed to knock off the rearview mirror in my efforts to turn around, backtrack, and try to get out of there! I had no direction and no signal from my cell phone. It was disorienting. I couldn’t find my way back walking. I figured I’d be there overnight and maybe someone would come looking for me. It was absolutely frightening, and I talked to God a lot, asking for help, pleading to give me a sense of which way to go.

When I found my way out, I was crying and immediately called Ivan, apologizing because the rearview mirror was broken, but even more because I needed to know that I was okay. Reorienting myself to my surroundings took a few minutes, even though it was probably only a couple of miles out of the way. The feeling of getting out of the woods was a welcome relief.

There are always those signs at rest areas where the red dot says, “You are here.” And there’s information about how far away we are from other cities. But how many of us would ever want to see this sign? **SLIDE:** *You were here. Now you are lost.* That’s not really a welcome sign.

Alex MacLennan writes, “Once I was lost in the Amazon. My heart pounded as I stood on a ridge so steep and densely packed with vegetation that I could barely see 10 feet in any direction. Panicked scenarios spiraled. I felt as utterly isolated as if I were at the end of the world.

In reality, my guide was probably only out of sight for a few seconds, and the dirt road I’d just left was a mere five-minute walk away.” “But, MacLennan says, that’s what the Amazon does to you: Its lush, stuffy, crowded immensity makes it clear how small you are in the scheme of things...”

I’ll confess that it’s difficult to consider getting lost as a gift. Today we’re celebrating Scouting Sunday, and I always think of Scouts as being prepared - never getting lost. But perhaps MacLennan has a point for our spiritual lives. “Getting lost” in our spiritual lives can help gain some perspective about our place in the world. It’s not

that we're unimportant, but there's a sense the magnitude of the world and our small place in it.

Heather Greenwood Davis, a travel writer for National Geographic, actually encourages us to "get lost" so that we're seeing new sites and not just the most popular destinations. She advises us to ask the neighbors for suggestions, get rid of our GPS so the route isn't so direct, talk to strangers about what they've seen, use public transportation for something different, and be open to the journey. She says, "Not everything about getting lost will make you comfortable. That's part of the reason you should do it."

And the concept of getting lost shouldn't be so surprising. Scripture is filled with moments of people feeling lost - and offering their feelings to God. Take Psalm 42, for example: **SLIDE:**

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"*

If you and I drew out our spiritual timelines - where we've been with God over the years - we'd see a line that probably had a few zigzags rather than one straight line. We live in God's grace from the beginning. We believe that God's grace is active in our lives even before we acknowledge it. Even before we claim our faith for ourselves, our life lived in God's grace isn't a simple, straight line.

It's filled with moments when we've felt close to God and times when we could echo the words of the psalm: *When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night...*

There are those times when the path before us had no recognizable markers, and we felt nervous for what was ahead, and sometimes completely and utterly lost. And if we're honest, we struggle when **we** have a plan, and then **our** plan isn't what happens. Something else gets thrown in the mix, and it puts us off our course and changes our plan.

But again, maybe we shouldn't be so surprised. Life with God is full of changes in plans and detours. Our best-laid plans may not be the way that life comes together, and the course we've charted isn't what we end up following. (**SLIDE**) Erol Ozan says, "Some beautiful paths can't be discovered without getting lost." Are we willing to believe that getting lost can be an opportunity to be found by God in a new way?

Do we believe that God is always seeking us when we feel lost and searching? Searching and seeking can be messy and scary business, and we may even experience hurt along the way. Even when we feel lost, how is God responding with promptings of the Spirit to guide us? How do we know? Rachel Held Evans says, "Sometimes we are closer to the truth in our vulnerability than in our safe certainties..." Perhaps getting lost is a part of that vulnerability.

The story of God's call to Samuel and Eli's part in Samuel hearing God's call is a powerful one that reminds us of how we can be open to God. Samuel is assistant to priest Eli and hears a voice one night, eventually discovering, with Eli's help and encouragement that God is speaking. The beginning of Samuel's call is a wonderful reminder of the ways we can encourage one another on the journey with God.

But there are a few things to notice. First, though we may be looking for clear, direct, and even bold actions from God, many times God moves and acts in subtle ways. Scripture says that a voice spoke, but perhaps it was Samuel's own sense of the Spirit moving - his intuition and awareness - that helped him hear.

Second, the voice comes to Samuel when he is alone. And notice that it's in the quiet of night. That's not to say that God can't come any time God chooses, but how often do we make the space and time for quiet enough to listen? **SLIDE:** Family Circus cartoon: When it snows, I like to listen to the quiet. How many of us ever listen to the quiet? There's an invitation to be more intentional about creating quiet time in our day and in our lives - easier said than done - but how might we be more open to God?

One more thing to notice is that Samuel receives multiple "hits" of intuition. Eric Elnes says, "It's not like God gives up on Samuel for mistaking the signals, even though he keeps misinterpreting them." Our doubts or lack of awareness aren't enough to stop the movement of God's Spirit, and usually those moments when we recognize God's presence in our lost times help us to move slowly - not charging ahead all at once. The path is revealed slowly, and we follow one section at a time.

Even though a part of Samuel's call is to share judgment with Eli, there's a word about God's faithfulness being more powerful than any of our unfaithfulness. That's not license for us to forget about being faithful, but it's a reminder that we can still share Good News with one another when we've struggled. That's not something we're willing to admit because it requires that we become vulnerable. It's a reminder that God works through us, as imperfect as we are.

So the invitation today is to offer words of encouragement. What have you learned about getting lost that might help someone else? What would you tell someone about the journey with God? I thought of Edna Gilbert's advice: "Always look ahead." For someone with almost 100 years of life experience, that's a witness of faith. Perhaps there's a sense of not replaying or dwelling on what has been, but anticipating God's presence and grace with us all our days.

The good news is that getting lost doesn't mean that God is far away. It may feel that way, but God is seeking us, too. Getting lost is the only way we can be found. Sometimes it means that we stop, breathe, and wait. Sometimes it means we take small steps that lead us home to God where our hearts find rest and peace. There isn't a definitive GPS route to follow, but there's an opportunity for us to pay closer attention and know that God is with us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE - *Come and Rest*