

Charles R. Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor
First Christian Church
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Summer Road Trip Through the Psalms 1. Getting Ready

Selection from Psalm 119, adapted from The Message. You're blessed when you stay on course, walking steadily on the road revealed by God. You're blessed when you follow the divine directions, doing your best to find God. That's right—you don't go off on your own; you walk straight along the road God has set. You, God, prescribed the right way to live; now you expect us to live it. Oh, that my steps might be steady, keeping to the course you set; Then I'd never have any regrets in comparing my life with your counsel. I thank you for speaking straight from your heart; I learn the pattern of your righteous ways. I'm going to do what you tell me to do; don't ever walk off and leave me. Be generous with me and I'll live a full life; not for a minute will I take my eyes off your road. Open my eyes so I can see what you show me of your miracle-wonders. I'm a stranger in these parts; give me clear directions. God, teach me lessons for living so I can stay the course. Give me insight so I can do what you tell me -- my whole life one long, obedient response. Guide me down the road of your commandments; I love traveling this freeway! Give me a bent for your words of wisdom, and not for piling up loot. Divert my eyes from toys and trinkets, invigorate me on the pilgrim way.

It's that time of year. My Facebook feed has started to have pictures of folks on their summer vacations or talking about their plans for vacations. There are posts about routings that will get you to all fifty states with the least mileage, and links to the scariest roads to drive in Colorado, and one dubious one about a road trip routing that will take you to all of Oklahoma's best waterfalls (I wasn't aware that there was water in Oklahoma). Americans like to travel in the summer. AAA says that thirty-five percent of American families took a road trip vacation last summer¹ and forty-million Americans got a head start on summer travel with a Memorial Day trip this year.² We have songs about highways; many of us of a certain age can still sing Beach Boys songs about getting around and little deuce coups, and Dinah Shore's (now I've really dated myself!) ditty telling us to see the USA in our Chevrolets. And who doesn't know Willie Nelson's

¹<http://newsroom.aaa.com/2016/04/aaa-one-third-americans-will-take-family-vacation-year/>

²<https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/roadwarriorvoices/2017/05/17/more-people-travel-memorial-day-says-aaa/101782130/>

classic "On the Road Again"?

Why do we love our summer travels, our road trips? Lots of reasons: we hope to learn things we didn't know, we want to see things we've only read about, we want to refresh and renew ourselves and re-connect with family and friends away from the routine that circumscribes our schedules. We hope to learn the truth of Mark Twain's observation that *"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.... Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men [sic] and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."* Of course Twain also said *"...there [is] no surer way to find out whether you like people or hate them than to travel with them."* But despite Twain's somewhat cynical second observation, we continue to travel, to take our road trips because we have discovered that even amidst the uncertainties and annoyances there is sometimes no better way to see our lives in new ways and to open ourselves to new possibilities. We come to know the truth of that over-used but nonetheless true observation that life itself is a journey.

This summer we shall be using the Psalms as our guide to life's journey, for as I read them over again in planning this series I was struck by just how much Eugene Peterson's Message translation brings out the journey and trip images in the Psalms. Hear again some of those phrases from today's Psalm: *"...on the road revealed by God."* *".... you walk straight along the road God has set."* *"...not for a minute will I take my eyes off your road.... give me clear directions."* *"Guide me down the road of your commandments."* This morning, then, let's ask ourselves: how **do** we get ready for our road trip through life, as we seek, indeed, to follow God's directions? How **will** we be best prepared to locate and follow that "road revealed by God"?

To answer those questions, let's think about three of the things we need to do when we get ready for a trip: First, we pack for the journey; second, we get ourselves a good guidebook; and third, we know when to throw away the guidebook! So, first,

packing for our journey through life:

Some people despise packing. Some people make an art of it. Some people are enamored of those endless doodads you can buy that promise to make you a better packer. Some people seem to be able to make any trip, no matter how long, with a single backpack, while others carry a veritable U-Haul of stuff for even the shortest of trips. When you pack for any trip, you try to anticipate what you will need. You try not to take the things you don't need. You try to not take too many of the same kind of things and too few of other things. If you're going on a plane trip instead of a road trip you try to remember not to pack something that you may need, like the time I flew from Hawaii to Indianapolis in January dressed in my aloha shirt and sandals only to discover upon arriving that the walk from the plane to the terminal on the tarmac was in sub-zero weather – with my coat safely packed in my checked suitcase. The first time Barbara and I went to Hawaii, I packed some of the right things and many of the wrong things. The six carefully selected and packed pairs of socks ended going unused, and I really didn't need the sweater I'd put in my suitcase for some reason! If you pack the wrong things, you end up lugging a suitcase heavier than it needed to be and that doesn't add to the fun of vacation. If you forget to pack some of the right things, you end up buying a \$7 tube of toothpaste at the airport when that could have been spent on a mai tai or a latte.

Second, when you embark on a trip, particularly to a new place, you want a good guidebook – or, these days, good websites or helpful apps for your phone. Somewhere in my files is a 1958 road map of Colorado; it would not be a good guide even if I wanted to travel only as far as Denver – some of the roads on it no longer exist and I-25 was only finally completed in 1968. Even new technology can mislead you. I'll never forget on one of my road trips a Google Maps-suggested routing from east of El Paso to Alamogordo – which turned out to be a lonely 80 mile stretch of mostly dirt road that

ended with a sign that cheerily announced that we were not to leave our vehicles because we are in a live-fire area on the White Sands Missile Range. I have a thirty-year old AAA Guidebook to Hawaii but it would now be a very poor choice for navigating the Big Island since many of the attractions and towns and routes it lists have since been covered by lava from the Mauna Kea volcano. It's also important to get the right kind of guidebook for your purposes – if you are taking a road trip which involves hitting as many golf courses as possible a guidebook focusing on the best places to scuba dive will be at best unhelpful. If you love finding local, off-the-beaten-track restaurants taking your copy of the Michelin Guide is likely to frustrate more than help. Guides on our journey are indeed important, crucial even. They can help us know the way to go, supply wisdom from those who have passed this way before, show us where the potholes and pitfalls are, and keep us from being scared or lonely or frustrated.

But sometimes, to name the third element of getting ready for our journey, sometimes we need to resolve to know when to throw away the guidebook! I can't tell you how many times in Hawaii Barbara and I would see a couple or a family with their noses buried in a guidebook and their precisely to-the-minute typed-out itinerary in front of them – and it was clear from overhearing them that they were missing some of the magic of being in that place because they were so obsessed with the planning they had done. By doing so, they missed the magical, not-in-any-guidebook beauty of stopping by an unmarked stream on a side road, plucking bananas and papaya for an unexpected snack. And since guidebooks typically list only the “tourist-safe” places, by not stopping at that hole-in-the-wall restaurant that will never be in anyone's tourist guides, they missed out on truly getting to know some locals and having some truly memorable local food instead of just tourist food.

Now, you may be asking, what do all these travel musings have to do with our

topic for today? Just this: First Christian Church is embarking on a journey over the next six months and if we are, in the Psalmist's words, to "walk... steadily on the road revealed by God," we will want and need to do all three things I have mentioned: First, as we begin the search for a successor Sr. Pastor to follow me after my retirement six months from now, we will need to pack well – and to do so we will need to make sure that we **don't** pack unhelpful history that no longer applies and that we **do** pack a boundless trust in the God who has yet so much more mission and ministry for this congregation to accomplish! Second, we need the right guidebook: Our Moderator Don Metz will be announcing at the congregational meeting following worship the names of those on the Search Committee and they will indeed be good guides, and they will themselves be guided by the wisdom of our new Regional Minister, Joan Bell-Haynes. There are indeed a host of guides available for this process both within our denomination and without, and the Search Committee and Rev. Bell-Haynes will know which guides are helpful to the process and which ones would lead to wrong turns and dead ends. Third, and finally, they will also know, as they in the Psalmist's words "do... their best to find God," when to adapt, when to change the plan, when to look for signs of "God's highway" in new places, when to listen for the promptings of the Spirit for the way to go. I know that you will be praying for these folks, and we will commission and bless them a few Sunday from now for their oh-so-important work.

Before I close, let me say that those three pieces of advice about how to get ready for a trip, inspired by Psalm 119, also apply, not just to our church, but to your lives and mine. You and I always need to make sure we pack those things that will actually prove useful and up-building for our journey. Like my carefully packed socks in that suitcase that went back and forth to Hawaii un-worn, you and I will want to make sure that we are not packing things that won't help us and will still be there at the journey's end taking up space. Let's not pack those lingering resentments or fears or

anxieties that we carry around with us; they will not help us and they will only take up space in our lives that could be filled with better things. And, let us, too, find good guides for our journeys. That is especially crucial now when there are so many false guides to be found who shout at us, who promote fake news to alarm us, who call to the worst in us instead of the best that Christ asks of us as His followers. Finally, let us never as we journey be afraid to make a change in what we had planned. There are banana and papaya trees by the sides of our roads that can beckon us and delight us if we will not be too obsessed with following what we thought was the plan. Let us be open to the way that new people will come into our lives and change us for the better, who will bless us with new gifts and new insights.

But most of all, let us always, always, remember and heed and daily pray the Psalmist's words: "Open my eyes so I can see what you show me of your miracle-wonders." The road awaits. There are miracles out there. Let's get ready to see them. Let's go.