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## Summer Road Trip Through the Psalms

### 3. Getting Re-Routed

Psalms 86:11-17 adapted from The Message Train me, GOD, to walk straight; then I'll follow your true path. Put me together, one heart and mind; then, undivided, I'll worship in joyful awe. From the bottom of my heart I thank you, dear Lord; I've never kept secret what you're up to. You've always been great toward me-what love! You snatched me from the brink of disaster! God, these bullies have reared their heads! A gang of bullies is after me - and they don't care a thing about you. But you, O God, are both tender and kind, not easily angered, immense in love, and you never, never quit. So look me in the eye and show kindness, give your servant the strength to go on, save your dear, dear child! Make a show of how much you love me so the bullies who hate me will stand there slack-jawed, as you, GOD, gently and powerfully put me back on my feet.

If you don't fly a lot, let me give you a pro tip: If you're on the airplane, whether at the gate and waiting to taxi or in the air on the way to your destination, and the pilot comes on the intercom and begins with these words, "*Well, folks...*" it is never, ever good news. It means you're getting re-routed. If you're still on the ground, it will mean that weather somewhere in the system is delaying you or the pilots have discovered some mechanical issue with the aircraft that is going to significantly delay or even cancel the flight. If you're in the air, it almost always means that the weather at your destination is going to prevent you from landing and you're either going back to where you began or diverting to some very inconvenient alternative. *You've been re-routed.* Or maybe you're on a trip by car and all of a sudden the traffic is backing up for seemingly no reason until you come upon an accident that is in fact bad enough – as seems to happen daily between here and Denver – that the police have closed the highway and suddenly you're somewhere you never expected to be and even your GPS is having trouble finding an alternative. *You've been re-routed.*

Every traveler encounters such re-routings sooner or later. Every **life** encounters such unanticipated diversions and re-routings. Despite all your planning, despite all

your intentions, despite all the ways that you have truly tried, as our Psalm for today puts it, to “follow [God’s] true path” you find yourself on roads you never meant to take or in places you never meant to be. In our first two sermons in this summer series entitled “A Road Trip Through the Psalms,” we were reminded of the necessity of packing well, of having a good guide, of knowing when to throw away the guide, of how crucial the first moments of our journey can be, and of just how much we need to pray, as we move through life’s journey, to truly put our trust in God that we might be rescued from those things that would hurt and shame us. Today’s Psalm by its very depiction of the road we are to travel nonetheless reminds us at the same time that sometimes we do get off the track, sometimes we do find ourselves detoured and re-routed.

It happens in both small ways and large. A friend posted on her Facebook page this week the following comment: *“When you’re 102 miles deep into the roadtrip and ...the 7-year-old says, ‘Mom, remember when you said to put some panties in the suitcase? I forgot.’”*<sup>1</sup> I suspect a Walmart or Costco detour was suddenly on their agenda. The first time I ever drove to Big Bend National Park from Ft. Worth I missed the correct turn for the right highway and found myself unexpectedly re-routed when I discovered my error. The detours and re-routings that come in your life and mine are sometimes caused by something we did, but other times they are because of other peoples’ actions, and sometimes there seems to be no reason at all.

My wife Barbara puts it this way in one of her sermons: Sometimes those detours and re-routings are “purely and simply through our own fault. We can make some pretty dumb decisions, some dopey and dense druthers. Or we simply fail to function. We don’t do the work set before us. We sin against God and against others. And to understand our failure here we need look no further than a mirror. We were

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.facebook.com/jeaves01/posts/1750172488330226> Cited with permission.

wrong.”<sup>2</sup> And because of such things, we find ourselves someplace we didn’t expect to be, detoured in a way that can leave us struggling with which way to go.

“But sometimes,” Barbara continues, “it’s not our fault. We’ve done our best but something in the circumstances or something stubborn in somebody else won’t let it happen. It’s not our fault.” Yet we find ourselves just as detoured and re-routed as when the fault is our own. But most of the time, she concludes, “...it’s a complex mix of these two: partly our own fault, partly another person’s or other peoples’ fault. That is just the way things are in this complicated, creative creation God has made. But you discover... that this sorting out of where all the different pieces... belong does not spare you from [a sense of] embarrassment and... personal defeat....”

Let me suggest that the first lesson we can take from this Psalm about what to do when we get detoured on our journeys, when we find that we’re not on what the Psalmist calls, “God’s true path,” is to NOT obsess over who is to blame for our situation. After all, perseverating on exactly how to apportion blame for the re-routing, the detour, can conveniently keep us from simply and honestly acknowledging the fault that may in fact be ours for the situation. Is your unintentional off-roading 40% or 80% or 30% your fault? It really doesn’t matter. The only actions and attitudes that you can control, that you can change, are your own. That’s where our attention ought to be when we find ourselves having failed to stay on the route we’d planned.

And indeed we find ourselves dealing with many kinds of failures/detours, some of which may well be significantly caused by us, and others that aren’t. We could all name a litany of life’s detours, failures to go in the way that we had planned. In her wonderful sermon, again, Barbara lays out some of those failures to stay on the road.

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<sup>2</sup>All quotes from Rev. Blaisdell are from her sermon “Learning from the Powerful Prayers of the Psalms: The Felicity of Failure” preached at United Community Church, Hilo, Hawaii, March 22, 2009. The “litany” on the next page also uses much of her phrasing. I’m grateful to her for this sermon that helped me break open this text this week in the context of this sermon series.

Listen to her litany of such detours:

We grow older and we may face a risk of professional or vocational detours. We're fired or demoted or lose a business or in some other way come to realize we are not performing, not advancing. We're not respected and it cuts deeply, very deeply. Or there are sometimes marital detours. If you have ever been married or in any long-term relationship, you know you begin life together with a dream of a strong a mature relationship, a warm and loving home, a haven of peace for family and friends. But somewhere along the line it all falls apart and you find yourself in the wreckage of a relationship you never dreamed that you, of all people would come to. There can also be detours with our children. We conceive children with a dream of raising them into strong and loving adults. But in any family, no matter how strong and loving, something can go wrong. We have all seen it happen in the best, most loving, most Christian of families. Sometimes something goes deeply wrong and parents can't stop asking "Where did we go wrong?"

Then there are our own moral failures, which is perhaps the most devastating of all, certain sins we knew we'd never commit. It's like that list of things you keep in your head that your mother or father said and you swore you'd never say to your children – but then you find those very words coming out of your mouth. But now you've made a moral detour that you didn't plan and never expected to commit. And you can't find the way back again. And then there are what we might call spiritual detours, where we wrestle for years with our inner selves, trying to conquer old patterns and addictions, bad habits and demons, in order to grow stronger and freer. And somehow we never quite seem to get there, we never seem to get back on that path, that route we planned even if we see it glimmering and beckoning in the distance.

What DO we do when life's journey becomes a detour from what we had hoped? What DO we do when an unexpected re-route of our journey – whether we

caused it or not – finds us someplace we never expected to be? The first thing we do is to know that we stand in good company. Almost half of the 150 Psalms are what scholars call “psalms of lament,” where the author is confessing that he or she is scared, angry, hopeless, or suffering. The writers of the psalms – composed, scholars think, over the course of 500 years<sup>3</sup> – did not shy away from honestly expressing how lost they found themselves in a particular moment, how their journey had taken them on detours that they didn’t want or bargain for. But that, then, is the second thing that we can do when we get re-routed: We honestly acknowledge our lostness, honestly acknowledge, even, the sin that may have put us there. Again, listen to Barbara’s words here: “The only place to begin is in a full and open acceptance that failure is a fact in every human life, including yours, including mine. The sickest thing we can do is to live in the lie that keeps the fact of our failures a secret.... So why not, at the very least agree to be truthful, to assume and accept that we are all looking at failure here.” Secrets that we kept from ourselves are the most corrosive kind. It takes enormous mental energy to live in such denial. It is as if our journey finds us in a desert landscape but with all our might we insist that, no, we are camped beside a lovely lake.

Third, you and I need to shift the focus, to re-purpose the energy we are giving to perseverating about our mistakes and denying that we have in fact been detoured. How do we do that? Well, again, the Psalmists’ pattern in all of those psalms of lament is instructive, and we see that pattern in today’s Psalm: we need to remind ourselves of who God is, not simply focus on who we are. We need to resign, as a friend puts it, from being the “general manager of the universe” and instead honestly acknowledge that sometimes we just don’t have the control we wish we did and the life has flung us into places we never expected to go. Instead, we the Psalmist invites us to return to who God is with these words: “you, O God, are both tender and kind, not easily

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<sup>3</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalms#Origins>

angered, immense in love, and you never, never quit.” Yet this is where the English language fails us. The word translated as “love” here is actually oh-so-much more profound than the promiscuous way we sometimes use it to describe our approval of things from automobiles to ice cream. No, the Hebrew word is “*hesed*.” *Hesed*. Say it from the back of your throat (but try not to aim at your neighbor’s neck). As one pastor puts it, “The Hebrew meaning is difficult to convey with any single English expression, and thus we see different English Bibles using a variety of translations...: steadfast love, loving-kindness, love, kindness, mercy, loyalty, favor, devotion, goodness, and still others.”<sup>4</sup> In the end, this is the word that lies behind that simple litany that is a comfort to so many: “God is good – all the time.”

When you detoured, when you are re-routed, what do you do? You look for a landmark, you look for something familiar that can again put you on your way, even if the new route is not what you expected. That landmark for us is indeed the unconditional grace of God for you and me, for each and all. It is where we should lift our eyes when seeking the way forward, it is the polar star by which we navigate. And what’s more, God is never absent on our journeys, never silent in the midst of our pain, and always, always seeks to bring the good that is possible. And even amidst the detours and the re-routes, you WILL find new grace. As one pastor put it, reflecting on the life of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian martyr Thomas More, “...each moment has its own particular grace. God speaks to you in this moment. If you miss it or pass it by or are not listening, you lose it... Some of the most inspiring times of life come unexpectedly through grace. You do not know they are coming and when they do, it makes you feel alive, that life is so worthwhile. Grace does something extraordinary.”<sup>5</sup> Or as writer Anne Lamott says, grace “meets us where we are [but] does not leave us where it

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=956](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=956)

<sup>5</sup>[http://wiltoncongregational.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/6\\_22\\_14-Sermon2.pdf](http://wiltoncongregational.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/6_22_14-Sermon2.pdf)

found us.”<sup>6</sup> Whatever the detours, wherever the re-routes take us, God’s grace will not leave us where we are, but will love us and set us on the right path.

Let’s close this morning by praying along with the Psalmist those words from the psalm: Dear God, “...look me in the eye and show [me] kindness, give your servant the strength to go on, save your dear, dear child!” May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup>A Google search discloses that Ms. Lamott has offered various versions of this observation with similar, but not identical, phrasings.