

Charles R. Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor
First Christian Church
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Summer Road Trip Through the Psalms 4. Getting Lost

Psalm 91:1-4, 14-16 Adapted from The Message You who sit down in the High God's presence, spend the night in Shaddai's shadow, Say this: "GOD, you're my refuge. I trust in you and I'm safe!" That's right-God rescues you from hidden traps, shields you from deadly hazards. God's huge outstretched arms protect you- under them you're perfectly safe; God's arms fend off all harm... "If you'll hold on to me for dear life," says GOD, "I'll get you out of any trouble. I'll give you the best of care if you'll only get to know and trust me. Call me and I'll answer, be at your side in bad times; I'll rescue you, then throw you a party. I'll give you a long life, give you a long drink of salvation!"

Psalm 31:1-5 Adapted from The Message I run to you, GOD; I run for dear life. Don't let me down! Take me seriously this time! Get down on my level and listen, and please-no procrastination! Your granite cave a hiding place, your high cliff aerie a place of safety. You're my cave to hide in, my cliff to climb. Be my safe leader, be my true mountain guide. Free me from hidden traps; I want to hide in you. I've put my life in your hands. You won't drop me, you'll never let me down.

I come by my love of road trips honestly. You see, when my brothers and I were small, our family lived in Ft. Worth, Texas, and all of our relatives lived either on Long Island or in Maine or in Florida. In those days, my father got only two weeks of vacation and every few years he and my mother decided that they needed to make that long road trip either to New England or Florida, but with only two weeks in which to do it and in those mostly pre-Interstate highway days it made for some very long days. More than once we were on the road by 4:30 a.m. and didn't stop until 7:00 p.m. Many children would have hated that regimen, but I loved it. I loved sitting in the "wayback" of our 1963 Chevrolet battlestar station wagon, poring over the gas station maps of our route and listening to my little transistor radio. I loved the changing scenery and staying in motels and eating at those first McDonalds that had begun to dot America with their 19 cent hamburgers and 29 cent milkshakes. I was always in awe of my father's ability, as we drove, to do what we call today multitask: he could read a map, drink a cup of coffee, drive and smoke a cigar simultaneously.

But of course, multitasking also tends to lead you to making mistakes, and, on these road trips, occasionally getting lost. That's a tradition I've also kept up with at times, from the 100 mile New Mexico desert detour I told you about a few weeks ago, to driving county roads in Indiana in August surrounded by 12 foot high cornfields which made it like being in a maze, to cluelessly wandering the streets of St. Louis trying to find the Interstate. What leads us to getting lost? Well, from my many years of experience with and much practice at getting lost, while it is often the case that getting lost comes from not following directions, I also have to say that sometimes getting lost comes precisely because you **have** followed directions! If that one sounds like a paradox, let me explain with an example.

Does anyone hear know the name Megan Phelps-Roper? I'll bet you know the name of her father, Fred Phelps. Mr. Phelps is the leader of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas. It is the group that is notorious for sending picketers and protesters to public events including the funerals of soldiers killed fighting Al Qaida and Isis, waving odious and awful signs that say things like "God hates fags" or "Your soldier is in hell now." His family is tightly knit and the membership of his church is pretty much the same as the membership of his family, and many news reports tell of a church and family homes that are more like a fenced compound than what we usually think of as church. And that architecture reflects his siege mentality attitude, and that attitude has affected the directions he has given his family and followers, including his children. Listen as Ms. Phelps-Roper describes her childhood, the directions issued by her father for the way her life should go:

I was a blue-eyed, chubby-cheeked five-year-old when I joined my family on the picket line for the first time... I'd stand on a street corner... surrounded by a few dozen relatives, with my tiny fists clutching a sign that I couldn't read yet: "Gays are worthy of death." In my home, life was framed as an epic spiritual battle

between good and evil. The good was my church and its members, and the evil was everyone else.... From baseball games to military funerals, we trekked across the country with neon protest signs in hand to tell others exactly how "unclean" they were and exactly why they were headed for damnation. This was the focus of our whole lives.... And like the rest of my 10 siblings, I believed what I was taught with all my heart.¹

She indeed followed the directions she had been given.

But Ms. Phelps-Roper later came to understand that it had been precisely from following those directions that she had found herself lost for twenty years. Her realization came from conversations she had on Twitter; as a Millennial she was an early adopter and used social media to spread her family's venom. But, to make a long story short, some of her Twitter conversations finally led her to realizing the directions she'd been given, the road she'd been following, had indeed left her lost. Listen to her describe what happened in those Twitter encounters:

We'd started to see each other as human beings, and it changed the way we spoke to one another. It took time, but eventually these conversations planted seeds of doubt in me. My friends on Twitter... were able to find inconsistencies I'd missed my entire life. The truth is that the care shown to me by these strangers on the internet was... growing evidence that people on the other side were not the demons I'd been led to believe. These realizations were life-altering. Once I saw that we were not the ultimate arbiters of divine truth but flawed human beings, I couldn't pretend otherwise. I couldn't justify our actions - especially our cruel practice of protesting funerals and celebrating human

¹Ms. Phelps-Roper's remarks are from her TED Talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/megan_phelps_roper_i_grew_up_in_the_westboro_baptist_church_here_s_why_i_left/transcript?language=en I'm grateful to the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for both the transcription of those remarks and for helping inspire this sermon (and for the quote on p.6) found in her sermon "How Do We Know What Is Right?", preached at First Christian Church, Tacoma, Washington, April 2, 2017.

tragedy. These shifts in my perspective contributed to a larger erosion of trust in my church, and eventually it made it impossible for me to stay.

You see, sometimes following directions is precisely what gets you lost. But, thanks be to God, as our first Psalm for today says, “God rescues you from hidden traps, shields you from deadly hazards” and says, “I’ll rescue you.”

Ms. Roper-Phelps’ life story also profoundly illustrates a mistake that too many folks too often make in reading, interpreting, and understanding their Bibles, and that mistake is this: to treat the Bible as if it is simply a book of directions, a rule book, a list of laws, a compendium of caveats about what you should do or not do. Too often the Bible is treated as something whose writings are without historical contexts. As Christian blogger John Pavlovitz says, but

The Bible did not drop from the sky and it isn’t a product of Divine dictation where God took over the faculties of the author. It is a sprawling library of 66 books, orally preserved and then written down over hundreds of years by dozens of disparate and largely unknown, very human authors in multiple languages....”²

When you pick up a book of Sudoku puzzles, it really doesn’t matter at all who the author of the puzzles is. The context in which the writer created the puzzles isn’t very important – the ease or difficulty of the puzzles are not affected by whether their composer was having a good day or a bad day, or by which puzzle was composed first and which last, or by what his or her native language is, and a thousand other things that are of no matter at all. But that is NOT the same for the Bible. Such things matter tremendously in our understanding and interpreting the Bible. We simply don’t need to know whether the Sudoku puzzle’s composer has a life and a cultural context similar to ours, but we MUST know such things if we are to truly grasp the underlying nature and

²<http://johnpavlovitz.com/2016/10/29/why-using-the-bible-against-lgbtq-people-is-irresponsible/>

message of the Bible. For example, the Book of Leviticus has, to our ears, some pretty strange food prohibitions, not to mention its infamous verses purportedly about homosexuality. It also prescribes, to our ears, some pretty harsh punishments for transgressing those prohibitions. But when we understand that Leviticus originated among a small tribe of nomadic desert people, whose existence was always threatened, we can begin to understand that some of the seemingly strange food prohibitions were actually a primitive version of public health laws designed to keep the very existence of this ragtag group of our Jewish forebears alive.

But such is no longer our context at all, and so to simply pick verses out that slam or shame someone for a behavior whose prohibition arose in a very different context and with a much more primitive understanding of biology, anatomy, and brain function is simply wrong and misguided. It is to follow directions intended for travelers 3000 years ago in a different place and time but which today can only get us more lost! Again, listen to the words of John Pavlovitz here:

The Bible is a product of its time and culture and contains the inherent limitations of its writers. It isn't an attack... to admit these things, it is simply being honest with our sacred text.... It's the reason we no longer stone adulterers or accuse paralytics of moral failing or imagine Hell sitting below a flat earth.

And then he goes on to say why this is particularly a problem when, as Ms. Roper-Phelps' family did, such understanding is not brought to bear on the issues of human sexuality. Listen to him one more time:

This is why arguing incessantly about a handful of... lines of Scripture, as if these verses answer the complex questions of sexuality is ...a misuse of the texts themselves. Using these few bits of text to justify discrimination and bigotry is reckless and irresponsible. We don't rely on the Bible to understand gender identity and sexual orientation for the same reason we don't rely on a 2,000 year

old medical text to understand the circulatory system.... When we put our bodies in the hands of surgeons, we ...wouldn't [want them to] accept that what we knew in the first century was at all adequate.... [In the same way,] If we don't see... the Bible's limitations regarding the complexities of gender identity and sexual orientation, we will continue to try to use God to reinforce our fear and sanction our prejudices, and we will continue to engage in behavior toward the LGBTQ community that makes our violence and mistreatment feel righteous, while not at all reflecting the love of Jesus.

Let me put all of this positively: the best way to view the Bible is as the record of human beings' encounters with what they understood to be holy, told over a 3000 year period, and composed by writers who were imperfect and sometimes mistook their prejudices for God. But – and this is crucial – when you look at what I call the “trajectory” of the Bible, you find over the millennia a movement toward understanding that God is not simply the god of one people, but the God of all people and a God who loves all people and expects justice for all people. For Jews, the Torah and their history reveal this; for Christians, it is the person of Jesus Christ who embodied and revealed such universal grace. The Bible itself is the story writ large of exactly what Ms. Phelps-Roper experienced: the movement from narrowness to openness, the movement from suspicion to hospitality, the movement from hate to love. As Barbara Blaisdell puts it in one of her sermons, reflecting on the prophet Ezekiel's famous image of the valley of dry bones, “all are created by God, are children of God and unless our beliefs and our laws and our practices indicate that reality, we are destined to live as if in a valley of dry, dead and scattered bones.”

It was that valley that Ms. Phelps-Roper was rescued from. It is that valley where our brothers and sisters of every orientation and identity are too often yet waiting

for us to help rescue them from. It is the place that God has lifted you from when your life is hard and hurting. And **that** is why we can sing with the Psalmist “you’ll never let me down,” because God never wants to let anyone down! It is why we can sing “Amazing grace.... I once was lost and now I’m found.”

Will you stand and sing it with me, hymn number 546, verses one and two.