

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16
Mark 8:31-38
Creekside COB
March 8, 2009

“The Long and Winding Road”

We’ve been in our new church almost three years, now. I have been asked lots of questions about why things were designed a particular way. Why so many rooflines? Why is the worship center high and wide rather than narrow and deep? Why is the cross above the chancel so big? Why doesn’t the front of the church face County Road 113? Why aren’t there more stalls in the women’s restroom?

Design is determined by three factors. First, function -- “What is the space supposed to do? Second, aesthetics -- “How will it look?” And third, expense -- “What can we afford?”

The question I’ve been asked most often has nothing to do with the building. You’ve asked, “*Why do we have a curved drive way instead of straight one?*” I’m the one who pushed the idea with the building team. Aesthetically, the “S” curve and the complementing landscaping make for a more interesting approach to the church than a straight drive. It is a “godly” design because God doesn’t create with straight lines. A curved driveway also eliminates the need for those annoying speed bumps.

But there is also a theological dimension to our driveway, and if you will stick with me, I’ll explain what I mean.

Poets, musicians, and philosophers have likened life to a road. As we move from one phase of life to another, we seldom follow a straight course. Life is disorderly and messy sometimes. It does not go from point A to B to C.

My son and I were on a two-lane mountain road in Idaho that followed the course of a large river. When we turned on to it there was a neon yellow road sign with an arrow indicating a sharp right turn. The sign below the arrow indicated what was ahead of us -- “Winding Road Next 80 Miles.”

Cheryl Crow sings, “*Everyday is a winding road,*” and we have to navigate twists and turns and detours as we go.

The earliest followers of Jesus weren’t called, Christians. They were “followers of the Way.” They walked the path of Jesus as the apostles taught them. The followers of the Way extended the reach of his love, and understood it would take a lifetime. These wayfarers followed wherever the Way led them. It applies to us, too. We are pilgrims on a journey. We are travelers on a road marked with potholes and scenic views -- monotony and mystery -- congestion and wide-open spaces, and we shall be on this winding road until we take our last step.

The Bible is filled with stories about people on a journey, moving from one place and circumstance to another. Adam and Eve were shown the road that led them away from Paradise. Abram was seventy-five years old when God promised him a new land and lots of descendants. “Take your bride and belongings, start walking and don’t stop until I say, “Stop!” Where or when, he didn’t have a clue. Abram’s cheating grandson, Jacob, spent years on the road, running in fear from his twin brother, Esau. Moses and the children of Israel walked in circles in the wilderness for forty years.

Jesus never had an address. He had no place to kick off his shoes and rest his bones. His ministry went wherever the road took him. With little more than, “Follow me,” Jesus persuaded an assortment of misfits to drop their fishing nets and tax forms and join him on the road to goodness knows where. Jesus went about doing God’s business, and he told the disciples if they committed to his long and winding way, they couldn’t make friends with the present arrangements, but instead follow him into a broken, needy world.

Twenty-five years passed, and God came to Abram again and repeated the promise. “My covenant is with you. Your name is no longer Abram. Now you’re Abraham, for you’ll be the father of a multitude of nations. I’ll make an everlasting covenant between me and you and all the generations of descendants after you. Your wife Sarai, is now, Sarah. She’ll give you a son and be the mother of nations.” With that, Abraham fell on his face and laughed.

“No disrespect intended, Lord, but that’s what you said when I was 75. My 100th birthday is coming up, and Sarah is no spring chicken any more. She is certainly not a suitable candidate for a fertility clinic.” The whole thing was absurd. How could God possibly make good on such a wild, improbable promise? How could God expect this wrinkled couple to keep hoping and keep plodding along with no idea of their destination... if there was a destination?

The Jewish mystic and philosopher, Martin Buber said, “*All journeys have a secret destination of which the traveler is unaware.*” When it comes to the promises of God, we don’t know what’s around the bend. We don’t have a clue of how or when things will work out. That’s because the road we’re on isn’t our road! Abraham wasn’t given a map, an itinerary, or estimated time of arrival. It wasn’t completed in his lifetime, and it won’t be completed in ours. But like Abraham and Sarah, God still tugs at our hearts, and still nudges us to keep going, knowing that at the conclusion the thing that will happen will not be of our making, but of God’s, and that whatever shape it takes, we know that it will be good.

The covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah didn’t have an expiration date. God didn’t make it just for the children of Israel but for all God’s children who want to do their part helping God restore humanity. The covenant goes on and on. Barbara Brown Taylor says:

“Something to know about a covenant is that it is a living thing, as surely as if it had a beating heart and blood flowing in its veins. Its life thrives on its revival, and every time it is uttered, the promise is renewed. Everything is in

the future tense. And yet. What better way to live than in the grip of a promise, and a divine one at that?" - (Gospel Medicine, The Late Bloomer, p. 38)

The benefits of the world are for those who settle down and settle in. God made us to be pilgrims, but the world makes settlers of us. Stay put. Sink some roots. Make yourself at home. Do as you please. Keep everything the same as long as you can.

I've been fishing my favorite lake in Wisconsin for thirty-two years, now. I enjoy the nearby village, Birchwood. It is a quaint, quiet place, but it's changing. It is getting harder to remember Birchwood the way it was when I first went there. I know how this will sound, but I resent what is happening to Birchwood. Long ago I claimed it as my little piece of paradise -- the place I go to escape demands and phone calls. I get a little crankier each year when I see more changes. Murley's Bait and Tackle is a movie rental store. The old Birchwood Hotel and Restaurant was demolished and in its place is a prissy boutique and beauty spa. The Wig Wam General Store was torn down to build a Dairy State Bank. Back on the lake, someone built a log home and put in a pier that ruined one of my ace-in-the-hole fishing spots.

I want a place to locate myself -- somewhere to hang my hat -- somewhere to surround myself with things that make me forget that nothing stays the same. As I quoted from C. S. Lewis two weeks ago, the more unsatisfied and unsettled we are in this world, logically, we can only conclude that we are made for another world.

"You have made us for yourself," St. Augustine said to God, "and our hearts are restless, until they rest in you." Augustine understood that restlessness is the condition that will dog us all our days on earth. Every thing we buy, every experience we have, every time we numb ourselves from it, restlessness seeps in and mocks us into remembering that all we have in the world is subject to mold, rust, taxes and time. There is no worldly fix for our condition.

Apparently, this is how God wants us -- unsettled, dislocated, and restless. Walking an unfamiliar road with no map or signs isn't easy. It doesn't feel good. It isn't rewarding to be uncertain. In the Letter to the Hebrews it says, "*For here, we have no lasting city.*" Birchwood will not stay the way I want it. We cannot go back to times that seemed happier. We can't wrap ourselves in wishes or surround ourselves with stuff that will make us *feel* at home. It will not help because home is somewhere down the road, in what Hebrews calls, ..."the city which is to come." (Heb. 13:14)

Will Willimon says, "God has implanted within us both the desire of home and the frustration of knowing that this is not home, and also, a promise of home.

In seminary, I was the youth pastor at a large Presbyterian Church in Naperville, Illinois. One Sunday night, the father of a girl in the youth group did a presentation for the youth. He was a psychologist. At the beginning of his talk he turned down the lights and asked us to close our eyes and relax. Then he led us through a guided imagery exercise.

I don't remember all the details, but I know it involved walking through a forest, crossing a stream, and following a rough path made with stones. I do remember walking from the dark, cool woods into bright sunlight shining on a wheat field. The wind was blowing over the wheat, making it look like waves on water. In the distance was an old, weathered house on top of a hill. He told us to walk up the hill, and then into the house. It looked like someone had left abruptly, years ago. Dishes and silverware were on the kitchen table. The cupboards were full. I sat at the table, wondering who lived there and why they left. As I was thinking there was a knock at the door. Before I could get up, the door swung open and there stood my sister Ann, who had died in a car accident just a year earlier. "*Is it really you?*" I asked. She didn't answer my question. Instead, she said, "*It will be all right.*"

At the conclusion of the exercise the psychologist asked us to share what we saw, especially in the house. Then he said, "The

house is a symbol of your your attitude about death and what you believe is beyond.”

I think about that house on the hill now and then. I still hear Ann. “It will be all right.” When you drive in to the church and out, think about the road you are on -- the one you travel through time. Think about Abraham and Sarah and the promise God made. Despite the obstacles of age and problems in the family tree, God’s promise remained. Realize that trouble and uncertainty are a part of travel, and not an excuse to pull off the road and go no further. We’re pilgrims, not settlers.

We’re not on a “road to nowhere.” We are on the Way. There’s a cross along the driveway so you’ll remember you aren’t alone to think like and live like and love like One who said, “Deny yourself. Shoulder your cross. Follow me. Lose your life in my life and really live.”

As you travel life’s long, winding road, remember -- God is before you. Jesus is beside you. And the twins, Goodness and Mercy, will follow you all the days of your life until you are home at last.