

Not All Who Wander Are Lost

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 19, 2021

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 3:4b-14, NRSV)

On my very first day in the pulpit here at Friendship, about three and a half years ago, I told you the true story of a trip that my parents, my sister, and I took way back in 1976. I want to share it again because I think it's a perfect metaphor for the human condition. We were ultimately on our way to Fayetteville, Arkansas where my "Papaw" lived. Starting as we did in Montgomery, Alabama, and not being up for doing the drive all in one day, my parents decided that we would stop in Memphis, Tennessee for a night.

But even cutting the trip in half, Memphis is a *long* way from Montgomery, and back in the days before they built up Interstate 59 to get people from Birmingham to Graceland, it was a terrible experience (at least for a child) on slow backroads going through middle of no-where villages in northern Alabama and Mississippi. Too easy to make a wrong turn and get lost if you didn't already know the way.

At long last (and not a moment too soon), we arrived in Memphis in the late afternoon, checked into a hotel near the riverfront and prepared to go to dinner, so we might have one good meal before we headed on in the morning for our ultimate destination – a good five hours and few dozen "Are we there yet"s away.

Dinner was great, but something funny happened on the way back to the hotel. It was dark, and Dad couldn't figure out the signage and took the wrong exit, and so next thing we knew, we

were all on a big bridge crossing the Mississippi River! We had to drive about a mile over the Arkansas state line before we could get turned around and get another shot at it.

And this is where the merely inconvenient began to slip into the comical. The signage that was confusing before, remained so upon our *return* to Tennessee, and if you can believe it, we missed the correct exit – again – and found ourselves crossing the river ... again!

I was a young child, so I was in no position to know how confusing the signage actually was, but however good or bad the reason, we were about as lost as four people could get ... A truth reinforced by the fact that we would end up making *two additional* round-trips across the river before finally getting lucky and discovering the path back to our hotel.

My one great memory of that night is my Dad, as frustrated as I've ever seen him, looking around at the rest of us with wild eyes (as we were crossing over the river for about the fourth time), yelling, "Forget the hotel – we're going to Little Rock tonight!"

Fortunately, Mom talked him out of it.

As I got older, I started to see that experience as a metaphor for life. We would all like to think that we know what we're doing, and where we are, and how to get to where we're headed. But the truth is, much of the time we don't. Not *really*. We like to think that we're in control, that we've got a handle on everything, but life eventually puts the lie to that.

So rarely do we really understand the full significance of the present moment. Or how the things we learn along the way fit together. Or what we're really looking for.

Growing up as I did at Memorial Presbyterian Church in Montgomery, I always knew that the favorite hymn of Memorial's leading founding member was "Lead On, O King Eternal." It has always been one of my favorites too:

*Lead on, O King Eternal, the day of march has come;
henceforth in fields of conquest, thy tents shall be our home.
Through days of preparation, thy grace has made us strong,
and now O King Eternal, we lift our battle song.*

That image made an impression on me early. It conveyed confidence, pride, and certainty. It suggested to me a life that was filled with deep conviction, clarity of purpose, and a blazed trail to follow. And it suggested a God whose Light would be ever before me, whose guidance would be apparent all along the way.

But maybe not *all* along the way, because here's the thing: Often, we don't feel like we're *marching* through life. It can feel more like my Dad felt in the car crossing the Mississippi River over 40 years ago ... and we're not sure of where we are, or where we're going, or how to get there, wherever "there" is.

This theme of not really knowing where we are or where we're going is deeply embedded in the stories of scripture ... wandering in one kind of wilderness or another:

- Abraham not knowing where he was going when he left home by God's command in pursuit of a land he had never seen.
- The children of Israel leaving behind the slavery of Egypt to wander, apparently aimlessly, for the next 40 years.
- The Jewish exiles in Babylon, leaving behind a place in which they had put down roots, to traverse hundreds of miles of barren wasteland, all to return to a land most of them only knew through stories.

All those of course are in the Old Testament. The Apostle Paul's story in the New is different, in that, for years, he didn't think he was looking for anything, because he knew *exactly* who he was and what his purpose was. He was a man who had every reason in the world to be confident – belonging to a people elect of God, from the best segment of those people, from the best family, from those who had God's revealed truth and were held in high honor for scrupulously following it.

But then, Paul meets the risen Jesus, and it throws his sensible, ordered world into disarray. All these points of pride, Paul says, are “rubbish” compared to the treasure of Christ, as the NRSV delicately translates the rather crude Greek word he uses. All these points of pride and settled security are like *that*, compared to the treasure, Paul says, of knowing Christ and being found in him – our truest goal and highest end. Up against or apart from God's love in Christ, they are shown to be less than nothing.

Before, he seemed to have it all, but in meeting Christ, all that was thrown up in the air. This safe, known world is no longer enough, and he too is impelled to become a wayfarer, to spend a lifetime coming to know Christ and living day-by-day into the power of his resurrection, wherever that might take him. *Wherever that might take him.*

That's the scary part: Not *knowing* ... not being in charge ... not being in control of your own life's story. We would always love to know where we are, and what things truly mean, and to be sure of where we're headed, and how best to move forward. But these forebears in the faith let go of all that. Such clarity is neither the promise, nor even the hope, of the gospel.

And so maybe our most important step in receiving the good news that God intends for us is recognizing that if our hopes for the future are built on *us*, on our own abilities, our own cleverness, our own knack for finding the way, then we will inevitably become disillusioned. It's not about us, and it never was.

And *that* is good news, for in faith we confess that *not all who wander are lost*. As we face an uncertain future, journeying on in the face of a protracted COVID crisis, we remember that the hope we cherish doesn't lie in what we think we can accomplish, but in *God* who is forever

working in us and through us, working all things together for good. As the Cherokee Elder told his discouraged son, “Why do you spend your time in brooding, my boy? Do you not know that you are being driven by great winds across the sky?”

Now this doesn't mean, of course, that we suddenly know what we're doing or how to get to where we think we're going. Our journey forward may still, often, feel like something *less* than marching, and *less* than direct. Paul himself wrote of *straining* forward to what lies ahead! Perhaps even looking foolish sometimes comes with the territory.

But this is no cause for stalling or hesitation. It is misplaced focus on our own powers – whether in arrogant inflation of them or in fear of what we think we lack – it's *these* that we are called to forget and leave behind. Our focus is not on ourselves, not on what we think we can – or can't – do, but on *God*, who has loved us and chosen us in Christ from before the foundation of the world, and who is the future that awaits us.

And so, we press on, for not all who wander are lost! Let us set aside our fears and pride and self-doubts, and feel the great winds of the Spirit at our back, driving us across the sky.

To the glory of God. Amen.