



The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

LIFE WITHOUT A GPS

Preached by the Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

August 29, 2010

There are countless ways of getting lost. There is, of course, the literal way of getting lost. The comforting computerized voice of the GPS suddenly goes silent, or the road signs we're expecting aren't there, or our sense of direction is just off, and we find ourselves in an unfamiliar neighborhood, or twenty miles north of our destination, or, for some us, lost in plain sight, just a few blocks from home. In the most recent issue of *The New Yorker*, the famed author and physician Oliver Sacks, tells of his own peculiar condition which makes it difficult for him to recognize faces or places, even the most familiar ones. In his words, "When I go for a walk or a bicycle ride, I have to follow exactly the same route, knowing that if I deviate even slightly I will be instantly and hopelessly lost..." On one occasion, Sacks continues, "my nephew came for a visit. We went for a walk and it started raining. We turned back, but I couldn't find my house or my street. After two hours of walking around, during which we both got thoroughly soaked, I heard a shout. It was my landlord; he said that he had seen me pass the house three or four times, apparently failing to recognize it."¹

Another way of getting lost happens when we find ourselves immersed in a pastime that provides great pleasure. I'm sure I'm not the only one here who has missed a subway stop from having been so en-

grossed in a novel or a crossword puzzle, or has noticed time virtually fly by while listening to music or playing with a child. It is a luxury to 'get lost' this way, to feel the hands of time slow down, to take a mini-vacation from the quickening movement of our lives.

When we are in love, we get lost in the eyes of the beloved. The outside world fades away, and the one in front of you becomes the only reality. I remember those first few weeks after my daughter, Claire, was born. I lost my concept of time, my sense of location in the world. All I could see was this little person right in front of me, with those little hands and tiny fingers. I didn't know the season, or what was going on in the world, or much of anything other than her scent, and her sweet little noises. To be in love is a divine way to get lost.

The writer Barbara Brown Taylor describes what she calls the 'practice' of getting lost, meaning the act of getting lost on purpose. For Taylor, the entry-level spiritual practice of getting lost involves making a choice to step outside the well-worn paths that we traverse day after day, like the brown and white cows in her pasture who have "worn narrow paths across acres to their favorite watering holes, shady spots, and clover patches. When the cows want to get from one of those places to another," Taylor writes, "they line up in single file and follow the tracks. Some of these tracks are no more than eight inches wide, which is about one-fourth the width of the cow. Yet the cows know exactly where to put their feet, even without looking."² In Taylor's imagining, we are the routine-loving cows, and it suits us, from time to time, to abandon the familiar paths for the dangerous beauty of the pasture.

For the most part, these are examples of benign forms of getting lost, with nothing much more at stake than a pleasant detour to a road less-traveled, an unworn path, a new relationship. There are other ways of getting lost, too, more malignant ways of wandering away from something and ending up in unfamiliar and perilous territory. Getting lost can be risky, and painful, and destructive. The prophet Jeremiah saw the people of Israel as dangerously lost. He looked around him, and what he saw shocked him. He saw a people who had forgotten and forsaken their God; people who had stepped off God's path in order to pursue false gods and idols. He saw a people chasing after emptiness, forsaking the fountain of living water for cracked and leaking cisterns. He saw a people who dismissed their covenantal history with God and be-

came what they sought- worthless.

The way Jeremiah saw it, and the way he frames the beginning of this oracle of accusation that we encounter this morning, the generations of Israel's wandering in the wilderness after their liberation from Egypt were the good 'ole days. In the verses just prior to what Verona read for us, God waxes eloquent about the happy days of yore, "Thus says the Lord, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of the harvest." The wilderness wanderings remembered as a time when God and Israel were 'in sync'; lost in the eyes of the beloved; enjoying the honeymoon of their romance. So enthralled with one another, the hardships of the desert were more pesky than dire, and the pain of what took place in Egypt but a distant memory. The hope of the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey loomed like a large, candy-coated question mark above their heads. The future so bright, they had to wear shades.

Other, more familiar traditions of the exodus paint a bleaker picture of that wilderness time- the Book of Exodus describes a cantankerous group of refugees who second-guess their confidence in God; complain bitterly to Moses about their conditions; even wish that they had been left for dead in Egypt, rather than trust their leader and their God to deliver them to safety. But for Jeremiah, what mattered was that the people and God were in the wilderness together, and the destiny of the people held securely and lovingly in the hands of their God. And the people, in turn, depending on whose version of the story you read, entrusted their lives wholly to God.

So the way Jeremiah saw it, standing in the his present time, everything would be a whole lot better if Israel could just get back to the wilderness, where they trusted God's promises and handed over the navigation to the one with the road map. Instead, Jeremiah saw a land of milk and honey turned sour and rancid, and a community of people deeply lost without their God. "What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?" God asks rhetorically through the prophet. "I brought you in to a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination." 'Even the nations who believe in false gods

are loyal to their false gods, but my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.' "My people have forsaken me," God cries.

Somehow, along the way, God and Israel became separated, and the people lost their way- truly, deeply lost their way. One bad decision led to the next; one sacrificial act to a false god led to another, and then another, snowballing downhill beyond control. What was left was spiritual rubble; the edifice collapse by the accumulation of small betrayals- fissures in the foundation of trust and faithfulness- the shared history of their wilderness wanderings no longer enough to keep them on the same path.

The people of Jeremiah's time were on a precipice, though they didn't know it, caught in the crossfire of warring empires- first Egypt and Assyria, then Babylon. They bargained and compromised with one another for their survival; but the priests did not ask, "Where is the Lord?" and the political leaders transgressed, and the prophets prophesied to false idols. And Jeremiah watched it all unfold, watched the future come hurtling forward at breakneck speed, heading toward a deadly collision and a new exile. And the people were more lost than they could even know at the time.

Truth be told, we are inclined toward waywardness ourselves, with proclivities for replicating the unruliness of our Israelite ancestors and a penchant for embarking on our own paths, and ending up lost. In an effort to solve our problems and advance our careers and find our fortunes and make ourselves more beautiful, we put on blinders and pursue feverishly the grand prize, the golden ticket, the carrot. We push out the other distractions and pursue, pursue, pursue. We become impatient. We don't look around us, or check our bearings, or consult with maps. We're on a mission to achieve something, to find the magic bullet, and we can be relentless. We cannot see the emptiness of the pursuit, or do not notice the accumulation of small deceits taking us farther and farther off the path.

Maybe it's the hazard of the human condition- that we prefer not to depend on others, that we imagine that we are pioneers and solo adventurers. I read an article about the trend on reality TV shows for contestants to say something like the following, "I'm not here to make

friends. I'm here to win." It's unnerving to watch it in primetime, in part because it makes a whole lot of sense. You're either there to make friends, or you're there to win a million bucks. The popular choice is obvious.

Oh, I'm not comparing us to reality television contestants, and I'm not judging them either. There is truth in what Jeremiah says about our pursuits. We have, each of us, at one time or another, forsaken the fountain of living water offered by God for the cracked and leaking cisterns of our own making. We have, each of us, pursued empty things and come up empty. We've all been lost.

When we do pause from our pursuits and look up, it can take a moment to refocus. But we do stop, eventually, and where are we? Our surroundings may look slightly familiar, but we don't recognize them as the landmarks of our life anymore. We're lost in plain sight, untied from our moorings, adrift in ourselves. Like Dr. Sacks, we may have circled our home three or four times, never recognizing it as the place where we abide, where the people we cherish most are resident, where our devotions and loyalty are unsullied by false gods and idols. What we need in those situations is someone to call our name, call us back, place us gently in front of our destination, assure us that we are no longer lost, but found, found and safe.

What we really need, and forgive the cheesiness of this analogy, is a GPS- a God Positioning System. We need a device that can sync us up quickly and reliably with God, when we've lost our way. Jim Carrey, in the comedy *Bruce Almighty*, had a page that provided God's phone number. If we can't get an imaginary GPS or a magical pager, we at least need a good map. The trouble with our faith is that the kind of map we're given requires a bit more navigation than we are used to. It shows us where we are, and where we've been, and where we're headed, but it doesn't give us directions. It's a map of multiple pages, like the mapbooks we used to carry in our glove compartments before we had the real GPS and Google Maps and other such things.

What we do have is the map of our covenantal history with God, the map Jeremiah refers to when he addresses the Israelites- stories of how God chose us and we chose God; stories of how we rejected God and God threatens to reject us; stories of how we turn back to God

and God is there waiting, arms open. This map tells us where we've been, illustrates the familiar landmarks of our journey. It's a good map for reminding us how long we have been on this journey together, and how faithful God has been despite the many and curious ways we have become lost.

And we have the map of the Church- the living community of God, gathered around the table and the font, with shared beliefs and sacraments, to walk us through our earthly life together and prepare for the heavenly one. This map tells us where we are, and with whom, guiding our movement and informing our day-to-day journeys with God and one another, through worship and our participation in a community of faith. Right now, the map of the Church has set Pakistan and its people in our path, guiding our faithful response to the horrible disaster.

And we have the map of Scripture, marked throughout with guidelines to keep us on the right path. The text from Hebrews that Katie read this morning is an excellent example of the 'clear direction' that Scripture can sometimes provide for us. As Hebrews exhorts us to remember the prisoner, as if we were in prison with them, we remember also the Chilean miners, as if we were trapped below ground with them, and the path of Scripture leads us to a social activism that will improve safety standards for all who labor in perilous conditions.

Finally, and most significantly, we have the map that is Jesus Christ. The early Christian community identified themselves as followers of The Way- that is, followers of Christ, who is the Way, the truth and the light. Christ is both our path and our destination.

We are still in danger of getting lost. And following Christ is no cow path to a shady patch of grass; there are risks in following Christ, obstacles and hardships. And we are still, as ever, wayward, prone to drifting back into restlessness and empty pursuits. But we can't say we don't have a map. We know exactly where we're going.

¹Oliver Sacks, 'Face Blind,' *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2010.

²Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009).

