

The Advantage of the Detours

Acts 28:1-10

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One of the best ways to miss the point of life is to waste all your days trying to get to the right place. *** Every time my wife Annie and I drive to someone's home for dinner we replay a little scene that goes like this: First, I tell her that I think I know a shortcut. Then, she quietly takes out her cell phone, calls our hosts, and tells them that we are going to be a little late. My shortcuts have a way of turning into detours.

That is true not only with my driving, but with my life. I didn't graduate from college thinking I wanted to be the pastor of The National Presbyterian Church. To tell you the truth, I hadn't even heard of our church. I started out as a high school social studies teacher. But my principal told me that I was spending too much time talking about life, which was nice, but the state of New York was paying me to talk about the French Revolution. That principal was the first person to suggest that teaching may be a detour for me, and I ought to think about something else. So, facing imminent unemployment I went to talk to the pastor of the church Annie and I had just joined, which happened to be Presbyterian. He got me thinking about seminary, his seminary, which was the sum total of my process for discerning the mind of God.

With lots of weaves and turns into different places, I finally landed here seven years ago as your pastor. There were no short cuts. But there were lots of detours. And along the way, I have learned an awful lot about the mind of God. For example, I have learned that God takes detours very seriously.

Pastor Dick Halverson used to love to say, "You go nowhere by accident." That little phrase goes right to the heart of our faith. What we would call a detour, the Apostle Paul taught us to see as the providential ordering of God. Nothing is wasted. There is purpose to it all. Now, typically, you cannot see the purpose until much later when you are way down the road looking in the rear view mirror. Along the way it feels like you are just wandering around from one dead end to the next.

When you read through the Old and New Testaments, it is amazing to discover how much time people spent just wandering around. Abraham and Sarah left home with a vague sense of God's promised gifts, but then spent the rest of their lives wandering around waiting and learning that living by faith was the gift. After the Hebrews left slavery they had to spend forty years wandering through a desert before they could enter the Promised Land. They too were learning to pay attention to the God who traveled with them. By the time they were ready to cross the Jordan, they had discovered that any day spent with God was already a day in the Promised Land. After he was anointed king, David spent ten years wandering around, trying to avoid Saul, who already had the job of being king. But it was during these long years that David wrote some of his most powerful Psalms. Even Jesus spent time wandering up and down the roads of Galilee with his disciples trying to open their eyes to the identity of this Savior who was with them.

Now we come to Paul, who we think of as the overachieving, purposeful, architect of the Early Church. But as we have spent much of this last year tracing his travels, it has become apparent that even Paul was led one day at a time along the way. More than once he was led into strange detours, like the two years of imprisonment he just completed in Caesarea. Now, finally, he thinks he is back on course headed toward Rome. But before he could arrive, a raging storm at sea left him shipwrecked on the shores of Malta, where he spent another three months.

The first thing that happened to him in Malta was that a poisonous snake bit him on the hand. When the natives of the island first saw it, they first assumed that Paul must be a murderer because even though the sea didn't get him, this snake is going to kill him as an act of justice. But when Paul didn't die, the natives decided that he must be a god instead of a murderer. It is easy for us to be cynical about the Maltese superstition with this snake, but don't we share their passion for understanding the forces that govern our lives? Why else do we spend so much time trying to figure out whether our leaders are gods or criminals? Why else do we devote so much time to our work, or to purchasing new computers that will assimilate more information more quickly, or to our health and education? Is it not because we want to navigate our little boats through the storms and vipers in the superstitious hope of getting to that mythical right place called happiness?

It doesn't matter how careful you are, sooner or later a storm will take you by surprise and blow you off course. You will find a disease in your body, or a cherished relationship will hit the rocks, or a job that you needed will go under. And about the time you think you have survived that, some stupid snake will reach up and bite you! Eventually, you will find yourself stuck in another long detour. At the beginning of the Divine Comedy, Dante wrote, "In the middle of the journey of my life, I came to my senses in a dark forest, for I had lost the straight path." It was then that he began to describe hell for us. But the biblical vision of the detour is not that it is hell. Rather it is another opportunity to discover more of the grace of God that is waiting on the shores of every shipwreck.

When Paul realized that he was going to be in Malta for a while, he began to take care of the people who lived there. That is one of the most important things you can do on a detour: Look for opportunities to serve the people you meet there. Paul visited the sick father of the most important man on the island. He laid hands on him, prayed for him, and the father miraculously recovered. Word of this hearing spread pretty fast, and soon others were bringing their sick to Paul as well. Now Luke, who is telling us this story, makes a point of saying that they were met with uncharacteristic kindness by the people of Malta even before Paul started his healing ministry. And after Paul started to pray over people in the name of Jesus Christ, that hospitality soon turned into spiritual community.

Frequently I have heard from those who are wandering through the long detour of chemotherapy that a day came when they realized that there were others sitting beside them who were on the same journey. So as the chemicals dripped into their bodies, they began to talk to each other. At first it was just hospitality. But when they later found themselves praying for these people, hospitality

became an experience in spiritual community.

That is another thing that is critically important to do when you are on a detour: Look for the spiritual community that God has for you there. According to our text, this is important even if you are only in town for three months. So many times I will meet visitors at the door who tell me that they enjoyed worship. So I say, "Come back. Get involved!" But they say, "Well, I don't think I'm going to be here very long." No one comes to Washington thinking they are going to be here long! Even people who've been here 20 years keep telling me that they are probably going back "home" any day now.

For people of faith, every city is nothing more than a detour on their way to heaven. Don't sit around during your sojourn here. You don't have time for that. Don't sit out life on the detour, thinking that you will get involved in community in the next place you go. You don't have any assurance you will make it to the next place. Yesterday we buried a man from Malawi who thought he and his wife wouldn't be here long. But they went ahead and got involved in our church anyway. He died last week in a terrible car accident. It's a real good thing that they didn't decide to wait until they got back to Africa to start living. It's good that they went ahead and committed themselves to things like community. After going to Rome, Paul's next plan was to head over to Spain. But he never made it there, because as tradition tells us, Nero killed him in Rome. You may have some great plans and dreams for the future, but tomorrow does not belong to you. All you have is today, and the opportunity to be faithful to your calling in the present.

In the present, you can be of service to someone who is in need of healing. Further, you can receive the people around you as God's gift of community. Actually, you cannot be of service to anyone without being a part of community. For apart from the community of Christ, you can only give yourself. And you do not have the power to save. The healing miracles of love and hope are only found in community.

Now the community you find in a detour may not be the community you wanted, or were looking for. Paul wasn't planning on falling in love with these people. Paul's friends, people like Aquila and Priscilla were way back in Corinth. The elders that he loved were back in Ephesus. His home church was back in Antioch. But on Malta he took the people he had received there as God's gifts to him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that nothing is more dangerous to authentic community than our dreams of community. For we will always love our dreams more than the people God is giving to us. "Authentic community," he wrote, "is not a human ideal, but a divine reality." (Life Together)

Notice, Paul doesn't wait for people to come knocking on his tent door to announce that they will be his spiritual community while he is there. No, he gets to work with these people. He starts fulfilling his mission, and the community comes as a gift. That is how we find it in this church as well. It is as you commit yourself to an adult class, bible study, teaching children, caring for others as a Stephens Minister, serving on a committee or a missions trip that the community is received as a gift. But it is never as community for its own sake. Always it is a way of furthering the ministry of Christ.

We are left with the definite impression that Paul and Luke had a great time on Malta. When the time came for them to leave, there was something of a party with people bringing presents and providing provisions. Which leads me to a final observation this text makes about detours: Look for the joy along the way. If you cannot find the joy along the way, you certainly won't find it at the end of the journey. Joy is found in beholding the surprising grace of God that comes to us in detours. When Paul's first ship set sail for Rome, it was filled with provisions to make it to Rome. But all that was lost at sea, and the ship was lost on the rocks off Malta. That could have made him anxious, or he could have said, "Well, God is the god over all things. If that is how he wants to treat his ship, that's his business. I can't wait to see how he gets us out of this mess." Which God did through the surprising generosity of the Maltese people. Always make room for God to surprise you.

The great enemy to joy is anxiety. It takes over our hearts when we torment ourselves with questions that have no answers. "Am I at the right place?" "Am I with the right people?" "Am I going to have enough?" Since we are never sure, the questions grow bigger and bigger, leaving no room for joy.

God has impregnated every day with more grace than we can see. But when we are anxious we miss the grace. Which means we miss the beauty of our lives. And without the beauty we will never find the joy. There is an old Chinese proverb that says, "When you have two loaves of bread, sell one and buy a lily." It is a great declaration of faith.

Lord God, we give you even our anxiety, asking that in its place you will fill our hearts with joy that we may be of delightful service to the people you give us along the way. Amen.