

## ***Waiting for Direction***

***Exodus 13:17-22*** *When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer, for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt. So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites saying, "God will surely take notice of you and then you must carry my bones with you from here." They set out from Succoth and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by the day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

***Exodus 16:4*** *And the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you; and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day."*

In 2011, USA Today reported that 380 people from around the world — even as far away as Japan and Australia — traveled to Carmel, Indiana, to study roundabouts. The Indianapolis suburb then had 69 roundabouts, more per capita than any city in the nation. Carmel has at least 80 now. It is interesting to note that Melbourne, Australia, has more than 3,000 roundabouts.

We have two "roundabouts" here in Benton Harbor. Most of you know what a roundabout is. Rather than a traffic light or stop sign, a circle is built at an intersection, and drivers go around the circle. Frankly, when they put the roundabouts in Benton Harbor, I found them irritating and a little scary. I was certain that they would be a source of higher traffic accidents.

But according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, roundabouts reduce accidents by 40 percent, injuries by nearly 80 percent and fatalities by 90 percent when replacing intersections with a traffic light or stop sign. Did you know that? Research shows that roundabouts are safer

than regular four-way traffic stops — especially if one is making a left-hand turn at an intersection.

This story in USA Today and a couple other sources online indicated that when a person comes to a roundabout, she or he slows down, usually focuses more on where they are going and are more mindful of other vehicles. While one may get the feeling of going in circles in a roundabout, all these things make the roundabout safer than other forms of intersections.

### ***A Real Biblical Roundabout***

In our text for today, we are told that the God's people were sent in a "roundabout" direction when Pharaoh let them go. Well, they certainly didn't have roads and cars and lights back then. But it seems that going "roundabout" was safer for God's people back then, too, instead of going in a direct path to the Promised Land. But the roundabout God's people traveled in this case took them much more out of the way that just going around a traffic circle.

Most of us know the story. The Hebrew people were enslaved by the Egyptians for over 400 years. They worked for Pharaoh and built Pharaoh's cities under the whip of the slave master. They cried out to God in agony in this bondage, and God heard their cry and sent Moses to help set them free. This was no easy task, because Pharaoh surely didn't want to let go of his free labor. But after months of Moses' literally pounding on Pharaoh's door and getting in Pharaoh's face admonishing him to let the people go, and after a series of plagues sent by God that included the Nile River turning into blood and the earth being covered with flies and locusts and even the death of firstborn children, Pharaoh had had enough of these Hebrews and their God and agreed to let them go.

Finally, after 400 years in bondage, they were set free to go to the Promised Land.

And the first thing we learn about their journey is that God did not send them in the short direction. The text says: "God did not send them by way of the Philistines, even though it was shorter ..."

### **God's Consults God's GPS**

When we read this, you can almost picture God pulling up God's GPS program, can't you? You can almost picture God putting in the location and then noticing the options that come up. "OK, should I send them on the shortest route, or the route that takes the least amount of time?" And some GPS programs even give you the most environmentally friendly route! I've wondered how they figure that out.

So, God pulls out God's GPS and doesn't choose any of those shorter routes for God's people. The text tells us that if he took them through the shortest route, they would have landed in a war with the Philistines, and God wanted to protect them from that. So this would not be a quick and fast trip to the Promised Land.

The text tells us that literally God sent them in circles. I believe the Hebrew word is pronounced "sull" — and it means to go in circles. And then we are told that they camp on the edge of the wilderness and will go through the wilderness toward the Red Sea.

### **To Chicago by a Northern Route**

I was trying to think of a picture we could get in our minds to give us an idea of what this must have been like. Let's say we wanted to go to Chicago. Most of us would just hop onto I-94 and drive to Chicago, or maybe take the train. Those would be the easiest and most direct routes.

The equivalent of the path God's people were sent on here would be something like us wanting to go to Chicago and driving to Ludington or even Manistee, taking a ferry to Wisconsin, going around in circles in many places in Wisconsin and, eventually making it to Chicago.

This is the kind of picture we have here of how God is leading the people. We are told that God does this to keep them safe from the Philistines, and we are also told that God gives them a cloud to lead them by day and pillar of fire to lead them by night so they can find their way.

God's travel itinerary and guidance here would certainly not get God a job with a good travel agency. God is surely not being efficient and direct!

And we also must remember that this was not a couple dozen people. This was thousands of people, if not hundreds of thousands. Some Bible scholars estimate that up to 2.5 million people set out for the Promised Land! Can you imagine the logistics of taking a thousand or even 1 million people on a well-planned trip, one that was direct, with planned stops for food and the like? That, in itself, would be exhausting. But imagine leading hundreds of thousands of people — people used to living in slavery and not thinking for themselves — on a journey that would take them through a wilderness and around in circles.

There are times when God's ways surely don't make sense! Have you ever noticed that?

### **In Circles, But With Signs & Manna**

But God's provision for the people is significant. God may be leading them in circles into a wilderness, but God will provide what they need for this journey. First, we are told that God leads them with clear signs: a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Where the cloud goes, they follow. That's all they need to know.

And God also provides food for the journey, enough for each day. They called it manna, and it was on the ground every morning and they were to gather enough for that day. So each morning, while the children of Israel were in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, they could count on two things — the cloud and pillar of fire would be there to lead them, and there would be some food, enough for the day. Guidance and food: God's provisions.

This Advent season we've been pondering the spiritual idea of waiting. In a culture that values efficiency and the shortest and quickest ways to get things done, the idea of waiting is surely countercultural. The first week of Advent, with the image of the cocoon before us, we thought about how, as we wait for God, God does something inside us, akin to what happens to a

caterpillar waiting in a cocoon to be transformed. And last week we thought about keeping ourselves prepared, keeping our lamps lit in our waiting, even when the night is long and dark.

### **In Our Confusion, God Promises to Lead**

Today, we will remind ourselves and each other that, as we are waiting, God promises to lead us and give us what we need.

So often, the paths of our lives are anything but clear. And though we are not Hebrew slaves traveling in a herd and snatching manna every morning for breakfast, it is not a stretch to say that sometimes our lives seem to go in circles. A loved one is sick and needs care, and we just aren't sure how to proceed. Or one of our children struggles with learning or behavioral problems. All those wise parenting tactics just don't cut the mustard, and we aren't sure how to move forward in a way that is best for our child or the family.

Or, at God's invitation and with much discernment, we start a church building campaign and get off to a great start, but still have a way to go. How is God inviting us to go into this next phase? Or we lose a job or find our budget being squeezed tightly no matter how we plan. What do we do and where do we go?

Or there is a burning in our soul, a burning to do a certain kind of job or reach out in a certain kind of way. The burning may make no sense with our life situation, and we don't know if that burning is from God or not. What do we do, and how do we proceed?

And always, always, there are those dreams for our lives that we carry. But the disconnect between our dreams and the reality — the wilderness and the promised land — is vast. Should we let the dream die or keep moving forward? What is God inviting us to do?

## Spiritual Walkabouts, Too

Now in addition to lots of “roundabouts,” people in Australia talk about something called “walkabout.” A “walkabout,” done a lot by the Aborigine people in Australia, but also by others, is a time when a person goes into the wilderness and walks about, maybe even literally going in circles. The purpose is self-discovery and for people to learn to listen for divine leading in their lives.

Most often, walkabouts are done by people in some time of transition in their lives — young men before heading into college or their careers, or sometimes people in midlife as they are discerning their path. It seems that the time of wilderness wandering for God’s people was not only roundabout, but was also a kind of spiritual walkabout — a time for them to learn who they were and *whose* they were, and to learn to trust in God’s provision. A time to learn to see and follow the cloud and follow the pillar.

And we have those kinds of times in our lives too, don’t we? The kind of times I mentioned above when we are not sure how to proceed. We feel like we are walking about and going in circles a bit.

The good news is that God does promise to lead us. Now, even though we have these amazing clouds and pillars in the sanctuary this morning provided by artist David Baker, most of us don’t wake up every morning like the Hebrew people did back then to see a cloud waiting for us outside our door telling us where to go. And I haven’t seen any pillars of fire at night beckoning me to go in a certain direction.

But God does promise to lead us. And in our Advent waiting, our invitation is to take the time to look and listen and pay attention, to discern what may be pillars and clouds in our lives.

## **Our Roundabout Route Here**

Now before we talk about what modern-day pillars and clouds might look like for us, I invite each of you to stop and think a minute about your own lives. How did you get to this place here today, First Presbyterian, or the job you are in, or whatnot?

How did I get here to be pastor of First Presbyterian Church? If you would have told me 25 years ago that I would be standing here today having the privilege of preaching and sharing this life with you, I would have told you that certainly was a crazy idea. And as I look over the path that got me here, which includes divorce, a few mistakes on my part and an incredible amount of grace, I am amazed. God was leading me roundabout, using the stuff of my life, sometimes when I was lost and couldn't find my way, but leading me nonetheless.

It is often so interesting and wonderful to hear stories of how people get to where they are. The Rev. Melvin Burton from Refreshing Fountain is 64 years old. He wanted to be a jazz musician, and after growing up in Benton Harbor, he got his bachelor's degree from Ferris State University, which was Ferris Institute at the time. He worked a variety of jobs, but he will tell you that every turn he took, he ended up circling back to the ministry. He couldn't get away from it.

About 25-30 years ago he and his wife started a house church, and now they have a thriving church that has a significant ministry to young people on Wednesday nights — reaching some of the more challenging young people in our community. He told me recently that God's path has taken him by surprise many times, but God is always faithful!

And as I look around the room, I know many of you have similar stories: of God directing you and leading you to do things, and to go places, even when you were unaware.

So, we may not have these clouds and pillars in front of us, but we can trust, my brothers and sisters, that if we long to follow God, God will lead us even when we are not aware of it.

And sometimes we will be led into wilderness walkabouts. Sometimes God's paths are not direct and easy. Sometimes we go through stuff to prepare us for what we are being called to do.

### **Clouds and Fires Inside Us**

Now let's talk a minute about clouds and pillars of fire. I believe that while we don't wake up and see those each day, God still uses clouds and pillars of fire to lead us. But for many of us, these are internal clouds and internal pillars of fire.

Let's talk about clouds for a minute first. Clouds are beautiful, but they do cover things up, don't they? Cloudy places inside us are places where we are uncertain. They make it hard for us to see clearly. Our tendency as human beings is to run from the cloudy and confused places in our lives. But in the spiritual life, God most often invites us to enter into those clouds.

A young woman I taught many years ago was a gifted singer. She also had a brain for physics. What a combination! Her father worked for a drug lab and himself was a scientist, and her parents knew there was certainly not much of a chance she could make a living for herself singing, so they pushed her in the sciences.

She came to talk to me her senior year of high school with a full-ride scholarship for physics in her hand. She was crying. She was confused. She loved singing and couldn't bear the thought that she would go to college and never be able to sing again. She wanted to be a music major, but knew that this was not realistic in her life. Her path was cloudy, and she just wanted the stupid desire to do music to go away. Could I help? I ended up inviting her to not push that away, but keep thinking about it. She was a Christian, so I could invite her to pray about it and just hang out in that cloud for a while, trusting that, in the confusion, God might be leading her. The last I heard, she did go to college and major in physics, and also joined the choir. She was smart enough that she could have gotten a research job using her physics anywhere in the

country, but she couldn't NOT have music in her life, and this path led her into education, where she could do both physics and music together. And I'm sure she is AWESOME with kids! I learned she ended up going into education and, by golly, is now teaching physics at a high school in Georgia, while also helping with the show choirs. She lived into the cloudiness and trusted God to lead her

### **Don't Ignore Those Urgings**

And then there are those fires! Those internal fires. You know about those — those fires in your belly that will not let you go. Virginia Byers, who is 93, has a fire in her belly to make a salad every week for our Thursday night church supper. I keep telling her it is OK for her to stop doing that, but NO, she cannot. When you have a passion or deep desire that will not let you go — even if it is crazy — don't ignore it. It may be God's way of leading you somewhere into something.

So, during this Advent season, pay attention to those cloudy places inside and those fires in your belly. They may be God's way of leading you somewhere.

We've covered quite a bit of territory today, my brothers and sisters: roundabouts, walkabouts, wilderness wanderings, God's promise of provision, clouds and pillars of fire.

As you take the small paper cloud you were given when you entered the sanctuary today and put it on your Christmas tree or in your home this week, hold all that with God in prayer. Christmastime can be so busy with all that must be done. Please take a few minutes each day to wait on God, to listen for God's leading in your Advent waiting.

And never forget: You belong to God. God loves you more than you can imagine. God longs to accomplish God's purposes in the world and uses people like you and me to do it.

## What the Hobbit Teaches Us

I'd like to end with a story I've used before, but one that fits here so well.

In the movie "The Lord of the Rings," there is a scene where all the leaders of Middle Earth are in conflict about who will bring the sacred ring to Mordor to destroy it. It is a dangerous journey, with much uncertainty and peril. There are the strong elves with their bows and immortality. There are the tough dwarves with their axes and good sense of direction. There are men with their resources. There's the wise wizard Gandalf.

And there are the small, weak, but faithful Hobbits. Frodo is a Hobbit, and as the others are fighting because the journey is too treacherous, he says, "I will bring the ring to Mordor." They all stop and look at him in awe. And then he says, "But I do not know the way."

Ah, the trust: I do not know the way, but I will go.

We don't know the way either, my friends. But God will lead us. Indeed, God will lead, and this Emmanuel who is coming will help us.

Amen.