

“You Can’t Miss It”
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

DIRECTIONS

When I went to Tennessee last month and left the cabin, I would inevitably get turned around. Roads are curvy through the mountains, and knowing north from south and east from west can be difficult for me to hang onto. Have you ever driven into unknown territory and gotten lost? When you asked for directions, did you get something like this from a local person... “Go that way until you get to the place where Joe used to live and turn left, then drive until you go over this big hill, make a right, go till you reach Barney’s Sip and Serve, turn west and drive about 5 miles, give or take, and the place is the green house with the red minivan in the driveway. You can’t miss it...” Have you ever tried to follow such directions, and ended up more lost than you were to begin with? If you’re from out of town, you probably don’t know Joe, much less where he used to live. How big is a “big hill”? What if the red minivan is in the shop?

LOST

About 20 years ago, I was driving home from an unfamiliar place. I can’t remember why I happened to be at Columbus North High School, but that was my starting point, and home was in Indianapolis at the time. I knew compass directions and could follow them, as long as it was sunny, but it was noon on a cloudy day, and I began my journey by going south on I-65. I was in Seymore before I realized my mistake. That’s probably the most extreme example of me getting lost, but I still get turned around and start walking in the opposite direction more than I would like. The Bible contains many scriptures about being lost, physically or spiritually or both at the same time. The scripture I chose for today is of the last type. The Israelites are following Moses into unknown territory and their spirits – once filled with joy at being rescued from a life of slavery – are shriveled with worry and insecurity. These are the words of Exodus 16:2-4 and 9-15...

SCRIPTURE

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” ⁴Then 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 that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹²“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”

IN THE WILDERNESS

You’re probably familiar with the story of Moses and the Israelites. The Book of Exodus begins by describing the conditions of life for the Israelites in Egypt. They were enslaved and oppressed, they were given impossible quotas and faulty equipment, and their baby boys were being killed. Moses was saved from this fate and grew to become the man God used to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land. To get to the land of milk and honey, the Israelites first had to follow Moses through unknown territory, and by the time of this week’s scripture, about six weeks after they left Egypt, it’s noon on a cloudy day. The people of God were lost in body and mind, they were afraid, they were hungry, and they began looking back to Egypt with longing. They yearned to return to the situation they knew, at least then they had food to eat. Their memories of their oppression and enslavement, the brutal treatment they received and impossible tasks, and even their memories the murder of their baby boys had grown fuzzy. When they said “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread...” they had forgotten that they were the ones who cried out to God to save them. They said to Moses and Aaron that it would be better to be killed by God in Egypt than to be alive and lost.

SAVED AGAIN

This episode wasn’t the first time the Israelites had lost hope. After the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, they traveled three days without finding water. Imagine their desperation when they finally came to water in Marah, but found it to be undrinkable. Exodus 15:24 states that the Israelites complained against Moses, saying “What will we drink?” But can you blame them? The group of Israelites weren’t only composed of able-bodied soldiers. The group was made up of former slaves – men, women, and children –

who had been held at the point starvation for years. And even the healthiest of people dies after three days without water. Moses cried out to God, and the Lord responded by working through Moses to make the bitter waters of Marah sweet. To underline the power of God's provision, the Israelites next came to Elim where there were 12 springs of water. God was saying to them, "Stop worrying. I've got this." They didn't stop worrying. They couldn't – I don't think anyone could under those circumstances. They had only been relearning who God was for a few months, and when they faced the dangerous unknown, their default was to look backward to slavery rather than move forward to salvation. When they ran out of food, Exodus 16:3 tells us that they complained again, and God responded by saving them *again*. God rained down bread from heaven, and God sent quails to cover the land so the Israelites could eat their fill.

INSTRUCTIONS, DISOBEDIENCE, AND PERSISTENT SALVATION

God imposed rules upon the Israelites. God would send manna from heaven six days each week, and the people were to collect it each morning of those six days. On the first five days of the week, they would collect what they needed for that day, and they weren't to save any over. On the sixth day, they would collect a double portion so they could rest on the seventh day. What was left from Friday's meals would feed them through Saturday, so they wouldn't have to exert themselves on the Sabbath. Some of the Israelites had difficulty following these instructions. People with food insecurity often hoard food, and that's what some of the Israelites did. They couldn't bring themselves to throw food away at the end of the day, but when they woke up the next morning, the food that they saved was squirming with worms. They also expressed their anxiety by trying to collect manna on the seventh day even though they already had enough to eat. You may be used to thinking that God was angry about their disobedience, but God said not one word to Moses or through Moses about the ones who had saved the manna overnight. The bread simply spoiled – not a punishment, but a consequence of not following God's instructions. Because they didn't trust God to provide, they ate less so they could save some for the next day. God didn't want them to worry and store up. God wanted them to eat their fill. By rejecting this salvation, the people who didn't obey got in the way of God's ability to care for them. The response of God to the people who went to gather on the sabbath was to let them discover that their disobedience led to nothing but wasted time. God did express exasperation to Moses by saying, "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The Lord has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day." God had offered a day of rest – a different kind of salvation, one that provided for the spirit of the people. The ones who rejected this gift punished themselves, but God gave them a second chance. God continued to provide both food and restoration for all the people, including the ones who had disobeyed.

THE NATURE OF GOD

We have a choice when we interpret Chapter 16 of Exodus: we can focus on the disobedience of some of the Israelites, *or* we can focus on God's nature to save again and again. While we can't ignore disobedience, it is much less important than God's persistent salvation. Rather than focusing on what went wrong – or worse – that the person herself is wrong, we must recognize that the *ultimate* outcome is God's gift of new life, and we must point wrongdoers in God's direction so they can receive it.

IN A WET PAPER SACK

When I finally got home from Columbus, I told my story of getting turned around and got this response, "How could you make that mistake? How could you turn 180 degrees from where you were supposed to go?? Especially considering the directions I gave you! You could get lost in a wet paper sack." How much better it would have been to hear, "Thank God you recognized that you were headed in the wrong direction and turned around!" The response I got made me feel small and foolish and put a crack in the foundation of my relationship with this person. The better response would have allowed me to recognize grace and grow closer to God.

JESUS AND LOST SHEEP

In the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus is criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners, he tells his critics a parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." I can imagine Jesus' listeners looking at one another with disbelief. No one in his right mind would leave 99 sheep to fend for themselves in the wilderness to go in search of only one. Yet this reflects the priorities of God, and all of heaven rejoices when the lost are found. Rather than berating the one who had turned away from God and started walking in the wrong direction, God throws a party when the one who is lost is brought back into the fold.

We are Jesus' presence in the world today, and we are called to behave according to God's purposes just as he did. We must rejoice when we find ourselves facing people headed in the wrong direction because it gives us the opportunity to offer guidance and salvation. Met with our persistent love, these people will turn toward God, and we will find ourselves living in the Promised Land.