

DEALING WITH LIFE'S DETOURS

Have you ever had the experience of needing to take a detour while you were traveling somewhere?

You planned your trip carefully, with a specific destination and an estimated time of arrival; then, without warning, a sign appears on the horizon.

Detour Ahead.

Detours when you're on a trip are usually temporary. Eventually you get back to the main road and continue heading toward your planned destination. It may be an irritation, but in the whole scheme of things it's really not a big deal.

Life itself has its own kind of detours, its alternate routes.

You plan your life to go in one direction, with a certain destination or goal in mind, then without warning some event or surprise throws you off course. And from then on you're going in a different direction from what you had planned or expected.

Unlike detours on a trip, which are usually temporary, some of life's detours are permanent. The alternate route you find yourself on eventually becomes the main road, and you arrive at a destination you never expected.

As the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung once said, "We are what we have become." But sometimes what we become is what we never had in mind.

I suspect that on our life's journeys, most of us never reached the primary destination we chose. We were detoured into a second or even a third choice which hopefully, in the end, turns out better than our first choice.

When I was in my early twenties, when I was desperately searching for a destination for my own life, I worked on an assembly line at Fairchild Semiconductor, was a desk clerk at a motel, and a parts clerk of two auto dealerships.

I had no clue that I would become a pastor until one day my minister said to me, “Fred, have you ever considered going into the ministry? You’re a natural.”

I can’t say that I’m a natural. But those words struck a chord in me and caused a detour in my life; and only a few months later Penny and I moved to Bangor and lived in campus housing so I could attend Bangor Theological seminary.

The Bible has many stories about people who had to deal with life’s detours.

Jesus’ life journey was interrupted with detours. He probably wanted to begin his ministry earlier than he did, but family responsibilities caused a detour. And early in his public ministry, before he started agitating the powers-that-be, I don’t think he knew that the road he was on would ultimately lead to his death on a cross.

Not only did Jesus’ own life have its detours, but when others met him it caused detours in their lives. Even as it still does today.

When Simon Peter and his brother Andrew encountered Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, I’m sure they never would have imagined that they would one day be leaders in a new religious movement that would change the world. They probably thought they would be fishermen for the rest of their lives.

And then there was Saul.

Saul, who was later re-named Paul, was zealous in following his religion. He was a pharisaic Jew through and through, and he believed with all his heart that the followers of the risen Christ had to be silenced. Saul loved his religion and wouldn’t tolerate anyone threatening or trying to change it.

His dream was to become one of the great rabbis of Jerusalem. And so he obtained permission from the High Priest to go to Damascus to arrest any Christians he found and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial.

But on the road to Damascus, Saul came to a detour. He met the risen and ascended Christ, and his life was forever changed. From then on, he went in a direction he never would have imagined in his wildest dreams.

No one would ever have predicted that Saul, the zealous persecutor of Christians, would become Paul, the first great Christian missionary.

This church and I are coming to a detour very soon, and life for me and this faith community will change. Whether that change is going to be good or bad remains to be seen.

Personally, I agree with the witty person who said, “Change is good; you go first!” But I’ve also learned (and maybe you have learned, too) that hitting a detour and having an unexpected change happen in your life, although it can be frightening, can also be wonderful. And I have hope that this church and I are going to make it through our particular detours just fine and end up where God wants us to be.

Of course, some detours can lead to unhappiness and pain. When a family member or a friend, or even a beloved pet, dies; when a marriage ends in divorce; when an accident leaves someone paralyzed or brain damaged and that person becomes disabled for the rest of their life, those are examples of changes that definitely are not good.

But that’s just the way things happen sometimes. No one gets out of this life unwounded; and no one gets out of this life alive. That’s why, when I’ve read fairy tales where the concluding line is, “And they lived happily ever after,” I have to scoff. “Happily ever after” implies that life doesn’t have any detours or roadblocks—which truly is a fairy tale.

A man named Joshua Liebman once said that, “And they lived happily ever after is one of the most tragic sentences in literature. It’s tragic because it tells a falsehood about life and has led countless generations of people to expect something from human existence which isn’t possible on this fragile, failing, imperfect earth.”

No, life on this earth isn’t a smooth journey from beginning to end. It’s filled with stops and starts and ups and downs and unexpected turns of all kinds.

Is there anyone here who hasn’t faced some detour in his or her life? Twenty years ago, would you have guessed that where you are now is where you thought you would be back then?

So, what do we do about the detours in our lives?

Well, I’d like to hold up some things our Christian faith teaches us that might help us deal with them.

First, our Christian faith tells us that God didn’t make the world so that our lives are without surprises. To state the obvious, God never promised that our life will be a smooth journey from beginning to end, without any interruptions or detours. Actually, it’s exactly the opposite.

But every situation, good or bad, has the potential and possibility to help God's ultimate plan move forward. As the Apostle Paul wrote, over time, "All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to God's purpose."

Yes, detours in our lives are going to happen; but with God's help they can be turned into something positive, something good. And we can help God turn them into something positive and good by our actions and attitudes.

In other words, we get to choose how we respond to the detours that happen to us.

Second, it helps in dealing with any detours we experience to remember that in this life, none of our plans, none of our dreams, nothing we accomplish, none of our successes or failures, are permanent.

Because we're mortal beings, everything is temporary. People often think that if their life's journey doesn't go exactly according to their plans, they've failed or all is lost. That's simply not the case, because every detour and end to our plans opens up a new beginning; and ours is a God who can make all things new for us.

It's good to have dreams and goals and destinations to shoot for; but if we don't reach them on our time schedule, or we never reach them at all, it doesn't mean our journey finished or wasted. It just means that God has put us on another, alternate path.

Third, and lastly, it helps us deal with our life's detours when we remember that Almighty God is in charge. No matter what happens to us, God is still in control.

I know that sometimes it doesn't seem like it. When our life seems to be falling to pieces or we look around at the chaos going on around us and can't help but think the whole world is going insane, our faith in an all-powerful God can get shaken. But that's when we need to double down on our faith in God and our prayer life, and trust that God will give us enough strength to cope with and adjust to life's unexpected diversions.

I will end my message this morning with this suggestion.

Think about your own life right now. Think about the detours you've had to take in the past. Then, consider what those detours have brought you in the way of unexpected joy; or how the challenges have caused you to become stronger than you could ever have imagined.

And you could also try doing this. Write down some of the detours you've experienced in your life, what they mean to you and how they have impacted your life. If you write down a detour that was or is particularly challenging, can you find any good in it?

Has it deepened your faith?

Has it made you wiser?

More patient.

More accepting.

Has the pain and struggle you experienced drawn you closer to the Lord in some way?

Whether you reflect on them in your mind or write them down, I pray that you will discover that life's detours can contain unexpected blessings and benefits.

And, to borrow a line from the poet Robert Frost, you may find that taking the road less traveled has made all the difference.

Thanks be to God. Amen.