

Sunday, September 15, 2019  
Rev. Jessica Paulsen  
FPC, Corning  
Psalm 139:1-18  
Isaiah 43:1-7  
Luke 9:57-62

### Detour Ahead!

Have you heard that joke? You know, the one about the seasons. It goes something like this: “what are the only two seasons in the Midwest?” and the answer is: “Winter and Construction.” Or told another way: “Know what the 4 seasons of Minnesota, or Wisconsin, or Iowa (just pick one) are?” and the answer is: “Almost winter, winter, still winter, and road construction.” And it’s funny because there is some truth to it.

We know that as spring comes and the snow melts, we’re going to begin seeing orange in a lot of different places—orange signs, orange cones, orange barrels, and so on and so forth. We might even see a sign that has this week’s sermon title on it: “Detour Ahead!” And as all of this pops up, we accept it. We accept that we’re going to have to deal with construction, we allow extra time to travel somewhere because of it, we follow the detours even though it’s not the way we usually go, and even though we might grumble about it a little (or a lot), we deal with it and we accept the change it is going to bring.

Because the end result of construction, right? Change. Something different. So, when we enter spring, and we begin anticipating all of the road construction, we are anticipating change. We are anticipating things being different. We are anticipating the loss of what was familiar; what was known. And we adjust; we adapt.

Now, what if, what if we were able to do this in all areas of our lives? What if we were to live our lives anticipating change? Not in a scary way, but in an accepting way; a way that

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acknowledges things cannot stay the same. What if we lived with the recognition that all we have could be lost at any moment—that all we know and all that is familiar, could change, and we prepared for the idea that things may end up being different? What if we lived our faith out in that way—recognizing that construction will always come up on our life road and we accepted that, we accepted change, as a part of our lives? Because it is and will be. Even Jesus tells us that. When people are committing to following him, he reminds them they may not have a place to lay their heads. He shows them that sacrifice, and loss, will be a part of life. Change is always going to exist.

This week's sermon request asked a very specific question about the detours of life, especially the unexpected ones: a cancer diagnosis, a fatal accident or sudden death, loss of a job or marriage, and so on. The question was: where do these things come from? Are they from God? From Satan? From some other place entirely?

So, here's my answer on that specific question. First, I do not believe in the personification of evil—of an actual being that exists somewhere called Satan who is actively trying and conniving to destroy us and the world. I don't believe in an evil mastermind. Because of what I believe about God. God made all that exists and everything God makes is good. If God made all that exists, and all God made and makes is good, then it's not possible for there to exist a purely evil being, controlling the rest of the evil in the world.

For those same reasons, I do not believe these things come from God. If all God creates is good, and God made all that exists, then what God creates would never be intended to cause us, God's beloved children and creation, harm, or pain, or suffering. I believe we can look back at the detours of life and see God at work in them. But that doesn't mean that God caused them.

So, where do they come from? The unexpected detours of life? They happen because we

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live in a world that is still broken. We don't yet get to experience the full peace, and joy, and comfort of heaven because heaven is not yet fully realized here on earth. I believe the detours of life, especially the truly unexpected, painful ones happen because we don't yet live in God's kingdom. They are a part of the lives our broken fragile selves have to live on this broken fragile earth until the kingdom of heaven is fully realized and fulfilled. They will come and they will go—just as construction season comes and goes—until God's kingdom is fully known.

And through all of them, God will be with us. That is what the Psalm and Isaiah passages remind us. God knows every piece of our beings and was there at the beginning and will be to the end. Whatever we face, when we pass through the waters, God will be with us, and we will not be overwhelmed.

So, if God is with us and we know we will not be overwhelmed, and we know detours and change will always be a part of our lives...why don't we live in a way that accepts and anticipates change? What if we lived our faith out in that way—recognizing that detours will always come up on our live road and acknowledged that even the midst of all of those changes we recognized that God is still God and we are not. Because we are not God, we must recognize that the workings of the world, pieces of our lives, are and will be a mystery. For what will come, what will happen to us—we don't know it. We can't know it. It is unknown to us. But it's not unknown to God.

Craig Barnes, Presbyterian pastor and President of Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote this book titled *When God Interrupts: Finding New Life Through Unwanted Change*, and one of his conclusions is this: "With God, change in our lives is inevitable, and without God, it is impossible" (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. 1996. 128). What if we were truly able to

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accept that change will always happen and look to the one who will always stay the same, who will always be taking care of us, the one who offers us all of life's blessings?

Which is where Barnes begins his final chapter, talking about the doxology—the song many congregations sing as we give our offerings to God—Praise God from whom all blessings flow / Praise God all creature high and low, and so on and he raises the question, “Do we really believe that all blessings flow from God...” (Ibid., 145) and that life is a gift; that life is something that can only be received, not achieved?

Because if we're going to start living with acceptance of the detours, that is where we need to begin. We need to start with recognizing that our lives are not something we've achieved, they are a gift from God, something that can only be received. Barnes writes:

Either we believe life is something that must be achieved, or we believe life is something that can only be received. Is God the Creator, or are we? Is Jesus the Savior, or are we? Does the Holy Spirit give wisdom, or are we smart enough on our own? We've got to choose. If we decide to work hard to achieve our own lives, we have good reason to worry. We know too many people who have lost their marriages, businesses, and health to really believe it could never happen to us. We've seen too many things that are hard to call blessings. In our bravest moments we have to admit that just about any tragedy under the sun could visit us tomorrow. So if it is only up to us to do well, anxiety will be our constant companion. Anxiety is that ever-present, churning fear that life may slip through our fingers. People who are anxious come to worship with their hands clutching tightly to things they believe they got for themselves and must work hard to keep...But someday it will all go away. Someday we will have to let go of our work, health, and children.

Someday we will have to leave loved ones in God's arms...When that days comes for

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those who have learned to receive life as a gift, they will give life back with hearts full of gratitude, thankful for the gifts they were permitted to hold for a while. (Ibid., 145-146)

We can't change the detours of our lives any more than we can change the detours that appear during construction season. But we can adjust the way we think about them. We can begin to recognize and accept that detours will happen and believe God was and is and always will be our Creator who loves us—the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, from whom all blessings flow. Amen.

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