

THE ORIGINAL GPS

Sermon, March 4, 2018

The Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19, I Corinthians 1:18-25

One of the incredible conveniences of modern times is the navigation system known as the Global Positioning System (GPS). It's an incredibly fascinating product originally produced for the U.S. military, and is now available pretty much worldwide. Basically, the GPS is a constellation of twenty-seven Earth-orbiting satellites (twenty-four are in operation and there are three extras in case one fails). Each of these three to four thousand pound solar-powered satellites circles above the globe at about twelve thousand miles, making two complete rotations every day. The orbits are geometrically arranged so that at any time, anywhere on Earth, there are at least four satellites "visible" in the sky above. A GPS receiver's job is to locate four or more of these satellites, calculate the distance to each, and use this information to deduce its own location via a mathematical operation called trilateration, which is beyond my understanding other than I know it works, and it can then tell you through the magic of Google maps or Tom Tom or some other navigational product to "turn left in five hundred yards" no matter where you are on Earth.

Note ... it will not do if the GPS receiver decides to ignore one or more of the four satellites ... they **all** work in conjunction to keep the traveler from getting lost. The receiver has to pay attention to all four; they work as a unit. It's not a perfect analogy, but it's the same with God's navigation system designed to guide His people through the journey called life. There's a sermon in itself here, but the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, are all part of a whole; one cannot pick and choose which ones to obey or disregard without losing one's way. We would do well to know and honor all ten if we would successfully navigate through this wilderness journey we call life.

Paul tells us, *"For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."* From the human perspective, some of God's ways and directives can indeed seem really strange, and even foolish; in fact, it has been so throughout history and throughout the Scriptures. Why does God do things that sometimes just don't seem to make sense? Why does God allow certain things to take place? Why does God operate in ways that seem so counter to what would seem to be logical, practical, commonsensical?

For just one example: In the thirteenth chapter of Exodus, we are told there were two possible ways to get from Egypt to the Promised Land. One way was to take the well-traveled road which was known as "The Way of the Philistines." We know from other sources that "The Way of the Philistines" was a highway, a well traveled trade route, that went directly north from the Cairo region and ran along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It was the most direct route to Palestine, a relatively short hop of 150 miles or so on the map (*in fact, it is known to this day; our tour guide from our recent trip to Israel spoke of it*). It was a heavily traveled trade route with lots of water, rest areas, and probably even a few Dunkin' Donuts along the way (*actually, to the dismay of some of our coffee addicts, we did learn last week there are no Dunkin Donuts in Israel*). Traveling just ten miles a day on The Way of the Philistines at the Exodus, the Hebrews would have arrived in the Promised Land in just over two weeks! This certainly would seem to be the wisest and most practical route to take; after all, that's the way everyone else took. However, as we are told in Exodus 13:18, God led the people in almost the exact opposite direction; He took them south, *"... by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea."* He took them this roundabout way in the wilderness where there was no road, no bridges, no water to drink. That certainly seemed a foolhardy way to go. All the Hebrews could see on that southern route was a whole lot of lonely desert and the expansive Red Sea.

No, God didn't let them take the easy street. He didn't let them take the obvious route. He didn't let them take the way that everyone else in that world would have taken. Instead, He led them almost the exact opposite direction ... down into the desert wilderness of the Sinai. Some of the doubtful Hebrews surely thought this was foolishness; they were sure they were seeing their fortunes and their future heading south, as well, where they were going to lose it all and die. So, why does God take His people on what seems to be a roundabout and difficult way to the Promised Land? One short answer: *the Red Sea turned out to be their deliverance!* It was after they passed through the waters of the Red Sea that God used those waters to wipe out the forces that were pursuing after them to slay them and/or to enslave them again. Had they taken the Highway, that pursuing Egyptian army would have caught up to the Israelites very quickly, perhaps a matter of hours! The highway would have made it too easy for them to be enslaved again. God knew what He was doing, and why He led them in this direction. No doubt about it, this roundabout road to the Promised Land was difficult. But it is precisely on the hard road where the people of God are changed, transformed, into men and women of genuine faith, hardened integrity and strong character.

God called them to leave the old slavery behind and He brought them through the waters of the Red Sea to begin the journey toward a Promised Land. By the way, that's part of the symbolism of baptism ... we, too, are leaving the old slaveries behind, passing through the waters and beginning our lifelong journey with God. Some of us passed through those waters of baptism as adults, just as the adult Hebrews who walked through the Red Sea.

Others of us, perhaps most of us, were carried through the waters of baptism in the arms of the loving parents who presented us, again, just like the Hebrew children were carried through the waters of the Red Sea by their parents. But all of us who call ourselves Christian have left the old lives and slaveries behind and are on the journey between the Exodus and the Promised Land. And before we arrive at the Promised Land, we'll have to spend a lot of time walking through this wilderness called life, where we learn the lessons of living by faith in the God who makes us free and wants to keep us free ... even though God's ways may certainly seem to run counter to the prevailing so-called wisdom of this world.

Three months into the journey, in order to help them keep their freedom, God brought them to Mt. Sinai where they received the Ten Commandments. The purpose of these commandments has always been about keeping the people of God free. They are a grace from God, for they are a means for us to help us keep our freedom, as we make our way to the eternal Promised Land. They are not just about obedience; they are about **guidance** and deliverance and life and direction. They are ten directional "satellites" meant to keep us from getting hopelessly lost and/or enslaved as we make our way through the wilderness called life.

I like the story of a novice sailor who took the helm of his ship one clear and starry night in the North Atlantic. As this was his first time at the helm, the captain told him to just keep his eye fixed on the North Star, and then retired to his cabin. But the young sailor fell asleep, and the ship drifted off course. When he woke up, he couldn't get his bearing. So he awoke his captain and asked for new directions, saying they must have passed the North Star by now. Now, that would be kind of hard to do sailing in the North Atlantic on a clear night ... the North Star is part of the created order in the heavens; it is there, one *can't* sail past it! Some may wonder why we pay attention to this ancient, pre-scientific code called the Ten Commandments. *"Haven't we sailed past this star by now? Aren't there any new directions?"* But we can no more pass by these Commandments than we can sail past the North Star. As Psalm 19 so eloquently intimates, these are as much a part of the created order as is the rising and setting of the sun! These are not quaint do's and don'ts for another era. They are woven into the very warp and woof of God's created order; they are about how to live this life, a life designed and fashioned by the Creator Who gave these Commandments. And they are not suggestions, ideas, or thoughts, as if Moses was "just sharing." They are Commandments. They are also gifts from God. Like the novice sailor, we, too, can drift off course and are in need of a sure and constant guide to help us find our way. These Commandments, when followed, will keep us on track.

It is for this reason that the Commandments begin with this important prologue: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."* This establishes the interpretive key to everything that follows. It's as if God's making the point that these are not rules for earning salvation. God has *already* saved them; He saved them from Egyptian enslavement. Now He is giving the newly released slaves a gift which will help them live and stay free. Ours is a God who liberates and who will not tolerate anything less than freedom for His people.

We tend to think of these laws as restrictions, but in fact they were more about *relationships*, rather than *restrictions*. Let's do a very quick summary: The first four commands deal with our relationship with God. Do you want to improve your relationship with your Creator? Then (1) have no other gods before God; give Him proper attention and honor and reverence and (2) don't worship false idols or superficial images; (3) hallow and honor and don't misuse God's name (*either by casual, flippant use or by taking on the family name of Christian and neither believing nor acting like one!*); (4) keep one day in seven special as a day to worship God and nurture your relationship with God (*and, by the way, work the other six!*). The second six commands deal with our relationships with each other, beginning right at home with (5) honoring your parents, then (6) no murder (*or, protect, honor and respect everyone's right to life*), (7) no adultery (*or, do all you can to promote fidelity, honor, integrity, chastity*), (8) no stealing (*or, protect, honor/respect the private property of others*), (9) no lying (*or, BE TRUTHFUL in what you say and do, make every effort to be a person others can trust, make your words matter*), and (10) no lusting (*coveting*) after your neighbors' goods or spouse. In short, if you want to maintain your freedom and good relationships with God and your neighbor as you make your way through life, honor these commands! Jesus Himself even summarized the Ten in two: Love God, and love your neighbor.

One final thought in closing ... I have pointed this out a few times before, but it bears repeating: There is a promise made in the second commandment, a promise which at first sounds like a threat, but it is a loving threat: *"... For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."* Generations! Do we understand that? Too often we live for the moment. Too often we give little thought or care for the next generation. But what I am doing now, how I am living now, how well I keep God's commandments now, will affect my family and friends and all whose lives they will touch for *generations* to come. That is true for every single person in this room! Our lives have a multi-generational impact for good or ill. Do we see the potential impact of how we live? In His great mercy, God shows love, He shows mercy, unto a *thousand* ... of what, people? No, generations! He shows love to a *thousand generations* of those who love Him and keep His commandments. Generation after generation after generation after generation will reap the benefit of our godly behavior, if we take hold of our salvation and follow the GPS of freedom. What we do matters; it does have an effect far beyond what we can even imagine. For generations to come.