

ANOTHER WAY

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Exodus 3:1-4, 7-11
Acts 16:6-10

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Imagine yourself behind the wheel of your car. You are on the road and you have a destination in mind. It doesn't matter whether you are heading out for a week of vacation, taking a day trip, or just trying to get to an appointment across town. Suddenly, you see the dreaded signs "Road Closed," "Detour." These signs along with the dreaded orange construction signs are some of the most disheartening signs for a motorist. We all know that "Construction" signs typically mean slower speed limits, more traffic and delays. "Road Closed" and "Detour Ahead" signs not only mean a delay, they also mean we are going to be rerouted. We will need to go a different way than expected. These type of unwelcome changes often create additional stress as we find ourselves worrying about how it might impact our plans.

Most of us have personal experience when it comes to closed roads and detours. Sometimes it's a bridge out, major road construction, or even an accident that changes our direction and disrupts our plans. Of course, such disruptions are not limited to the roadways, they are regular life experiences. It is not unusual in life to come across closed roads and unwanted detours, and for such experiences to result in disrupted plans, deferred hopes, heart-wrenching disappointments and loss, and unrealized dreams. Things happen in life that don't fit in with our well thought out plans. These happenings can hinder our progress, and even block the achievement of our goals and dreams.

Today, our Scripture lessons reveal to us two such examples. First there was Moses. After the incident, the one when Moses intervened in the beating of a Hebrew by an Egyptian and ended up killing the Egyptian, Moses fled from Egypt and settled in the land of Midian. He met a man named Jethro, who not only owned a lot of sheep but who also happened to be the priest of Midian, someone of importance. Before too long, Moses was married to Jethro's daughter Zipporah and he was tending his father-in-law's sheep. Moses and Zipporah had at least a couple of sons, their first-born son's name was Gershom. Moses and his family enjoyed a good and comfortable life in Midian. Every indication is that Moses was happy and content, but that life was not the life God intended for Moses and so came the burning bush.

While standing at that burning bush, Moses used every excuse he could think of not to go back to Egypt, not to face Pharaoh, not to get involved in the freeing of the Israelites, but God would have none of it. God rerouted Moses' life. And so Moses packed up his family, said goodbye to his father-in-law, and he headed back to Egypt. And the rest as they say is history – a history that was clearly a part of God's plan.

The Apostle Paul also knew something about changing plans. In the 16th chapter of Acts all the roads appeared to be closed to Paul. He had his heart set on going to the Roman provinces of Asia and Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit prevented him from going to those places. We don't know exactly what that means – perhaps it was a vision or some inescapable conviction. It is also possible that Paul was kept from traveling into those provinces because of ill-health; we know that Paul struggled with a health issue throughout his life. Like most people with a health problem, options in life are sometimes limited. So here we find that even a man of great faith like Paul faced closed roads and changing plans.

But the more we know about the life of the Apostle Paul, the more we discover a person of profound trust – who deeply believed that with God, there is always another way. When other roads closed, the road to Macedonia opened. And later on when Paul ended up in a Roman prison, and what was his hope and dream of carrying the message of Christ to Spain blocked, he took a pen in his hand and began writing the letters that comprise most of the New Testament. Instead of giving into anger and frustration, Paul used even his time in prison to put his faith into words that continue to change lives today. His example reveals that when a life is hit with a road closure, God always opens another way!

Most of us in this sanctuary can probably say that life didn't turn out the way we had hoped and even expected. But as people of faith, how do we live with that reality? Dr. Norman Vincent Peale once told a story about a man he knew who complained bitterly about the problems and the obstacles that always seemed to derail the life he wanted. Peale listened, time after time, and then one day he said, "Friend, I know a place in the Bronx where there are 24,000 people with no problems!" Oh, Norman," pleaded the man, "please take me there." "Are you sure?" said Peale, "Because what I have in mind is Woodlawn Cemetery!" To be alive is to face the stress and strain of closed roads and unwanted detours. The real question is "how do we handle them."

What do we do when a loved one dies unexpectedly, when illness claims our health, when a marriage begins to crumble, when our children make choices that hurt themselves and us, when the job we want and need is offered to someone else, when paying the bills seems to interfere with our dreams, when life's many unexpected happenings permanently change our plans? Some people handle life's frustrations, disappointments and tragedy with grace, with hope and even humor. They confront difficult and unexpected situations with faith in God's loving presence and with the vision to see new opportunities for growth and blessing. Unfortunately, anger and bitterness is also an option that some choose.

Think for a moment about your life. What have been some of your disrupted plans, your greatest frustrations, your heart-wrenching disappointments, and unrealized dreams? As we reflect on the unwanted detours that have forever changed our lives, Paul and Moses remind us that people of strong faith are those who are convinced that every time a road closes, God opens up to us another way. God's way may not be at all what we expected, but if we go that way we will end up in a place of God's blessing.

If my life had turned out the way I expected when I was in high school, I would be a registered nurse working in a hospital, likely somewhere in the Cleveland area. If I was married, it certainly wouldn't be to Peter, because I met him in Seminary in New Jersey, and Seminary was not even remotely on my radar at that time. As God slowly rerouted my carefully planned out life, I found myself confused and even fearful. An unfamiliar road can be very stressful, and I did not enjoy feeling that way. But in the midst of those feelings, my faith was both challenged and strengthened as I came to experience the peace of Christ in the midst of uncertainty. Without a doubt, who I am today is not at all who I expected to be. But I do hope that I am at least closer to fulfilling God's purpose for me in this life. I truly believe and I think Scripture bears witness to a God who has an amazing way of reshaping us during the unplanned detours of life.

So, when our carefully planned ways are blocked and our expectations are left unfulfilled, people of faith do not give into anger, blame, and despair. The response that God is looking for, the response that God can work through is one of trust. To

trust in God is to know that in the midst of every unexpected curve and closed road, there is always another way. And even when that way is unwanted and scary, if we dare to journey in faith, then we will experience God's blessing.

Let us now open our hearts and lives more fully to the One who promises to be with us always, to the Christ who walks beside us and who invites us to know his presence every time we eat and drink. All who seek to love and serve the Lord are welcome at this open table of Holy Communion