

## Adventures in the Wilderness: God Guides Us Ex. 40:34-38

Many years ago, when our children were 12 and 15 years old, we decided to drive from Virginia to Alaska and back in an old RV we purchased from a member of my wife's family. My brother was spending a year in Alaska, which is what prompted the idea to go there. It was an epic 4-week family vacation as we visited wonderful sites like the Badlands in South Dakota, Yellowstone Park, the Corn Palace- Yes, the Corn Palace!, Banff and Lake Louise in Canada, and finally, Haines, Alaska. On the other hand, the RV broke down every 3<sup>rd</sup> day on average. My son decided a few days before the trip that he didn't want to go, and sulked the whole way to Alaska and back! And, my daughter's softball team qualified for Nationals the day before we left, meaning we had to put her on a plane by her self in Wisconsin on our way back! Did I mention that the RV had no air conditioning? I think we all learned a lot on that trip, both from the good times and the bad. And memories of our journey loom large in our family lore!

The nation of Israel was formed during the trials and tribulations of a long journey- traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan, a trip that took 40 years! During that adventure, God was teaching them important lessons that they needed to learn in order to be ready for their life in the Promised Land. Those lessons came as they travelled through a

desert wilderness, totally dependent on God to provide everything for them and to guide them. They didn't learn these lessons easily!

Today's lesson, found at the end of the book of Exodus, had to do with God's guidance. It took place immediately after Moses had built the great tabernacle, following God's instructions exactly. The tabernacle, or tent of meeting, was the place where God would dwell in their midst as they journeyed. Listen as I read. <sup>34</sup>*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* <sup>35</sup>*Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* <sup>36</sup>*Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey;* <sup>37</sup>*but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up.* <sup>38</sup>*For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey. (Ex. 40:34-38)*

Now that's guidance! The tabernacle served as a visible sign that the Israelites were not alone in this perilous journey through the wilderness, but that God himself was in their midst. The great cloud covering and filling the tabernacle reminded the people that God was indeed there. It was a gracious act on God's part to give them this visible assurance. And when the cloud rose above the tabernacle, the people knew it was time to break

camp and leave for the next stage of the journey. They followed the cloud until it came to rest, where they would set up camp and remain there until the cloud began to move again. It was clear, unambiguous, objective guidance from God.

There have been many times in my life when I longed for that kind of clear guidance from the Lord- when I was considering a job offer, when I pondered going back to school, and even when the Session recently was deciding about whether to re-open public worship! Unfortunately, I've never received that kind of guidance! I've considered the possibility that I'm just not "spiritual" enough- and that is a real possibility- but I don't think that's the issue here. In fact, last Thursday during our staff meeting, I asked our staff members to talk about how they have experienced God's guidance. None of them has experienced the kind of crystal-clear guidance that Israel received in the wilderness, either!

Instead, one staff member remembered praying about a particular matter and then experiencing a "God-incidence"- a godly coincidence that she took as a kind of sign as to what she should do. Another talked about experiencing inner turmoil or dissonance which was then resolved when he made the right decision. And a couple people talked about God providing "open doors" at just the right time.

In Wendell Berry's book, Jayber Crow, the title character says this, "Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises... I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led- make of that what you will." (end quote) That's often been my experience, too. I usually only receive a sense of being led and directed by God in retrospect.

When it comes to experiencing God's guidance in advance, I have to admit I'm a bit of a skeptic. Part of the problem with many approaches to guidance, is that they are so subjective, like the couple who came to me to get married because the woman said that God had told her they should marry! When I asked her *how* God had told her, she said it was just a deep inner feeling. After meeting with them, I was convinced that neither of them was emotionally mature enough to marry, so I refused to do the wedding. They found someone else to do it, but sadly were divorced within six months. Inner impressions, no matter how strong, can be mistaken!

Or, there's the old story about a young farmer who observed an odd cloud formation while standing out in his field which seemed to spell the letters "G,P,C." He figured it must be a call from God to "Go Preach Christ!" So, he went to the elders of his church, insisting he had been

called to ministry. Not wanting to quench his ardor, they agreed to let him preach one Sunday. The sermon was dreadful- long, tedious, and almost incoherent. Afterwards, the church leaders sat in stunned silence as they met with him. Finally, a wise elder spoke to the would-be preacher.

“Perhaps the clouds were saying, ‘Go Plant Corn!’ Signs can be easily misread, too, can’t they?”

Maybe a better approach to God’s guidance would be the one found in Jesus’ parables about stewardship. You’ll recall that in several of them a master entrusts a certain amount of wealth to his servants. They are told to manage that wealth on his behalf while he is away. They are stewards of his money. Some do that work well and produce a good return for the master, who rewards them for their diligence. Others act foolishly and are punished for their poor decisions. You’ll notice that none of the servants run to the master asking how they are to manage his investments. Those are their decisions to make. They are simply charged with being good stewards of what is entrusted to them, knowing what they know about the master.

Maybe that’s a better approach to seeking God’s guidance- discerning how to be good stewards of all God has entrusted to us- our talents, our time, our wealth, our energy, etc. As we engage regularly with spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible study, fellowship, service, and

worship, we begin to understand what God is up to in the world and the kinds of things God expects from all who follow him. Then, when we face important decisions, we build on that foundation, making use of the resources that God has already provided for us- our minds, friends who know us well, mentors, counselors, pastors, and family. And we decide, trying to be good stewards of the lives God has given us, using God's good gift of wisdom. This approach leads us to focus more on being the kind of person God wants us to be in the situation in which we find ourselves, rather than seeking after easily-misread signs or inner promptings.

Now, God is always able to guide us by intervening in a dramatic, unmistakable way as he did with those early Israelites if that is necessary to accomplish God's plans. In that case, there will be no doubt about what God expects from us. But I think God usually works by allowing us to be good stewards of the lives we have been given, learning both from our good choices and mistakes! And God guides us through the principles we learn in his Word about what is important and what God values most. It is often only in retrospect that we see how God has been guiding us all along.