



September 23, 2007

Jeremiah 29:4-7, 11
Take Detours Seriously
M. Craig Barnes

Change is not easy for most of us. But anything that doesn't change is already dead. So the question is: How do we receive more life even through unwanted change?

+++

Jeremiah wrote his prophesy to the Hebrew exiles who had recently been carried to captivity in Babylon. It was not where they wanted to be or where they thought they should be. It seemed to them as if life had taken a long detour to the wrong place.

We know about detours. We are not a people without plans, but it usually is not long before something happens that we did not plan, something that interrupts the plans we did have. Then we find ourselves on a detour. Maybe your career has taken some strange turns, or maybe it is about to this week. Maybe a very special relationship has taken a strange turn into a hard place, or maybe the strange turn is that there is not a special relationship in your life. No one anticipates the hard detours into poor health, unemployment, or divorce. And no one is prepared for the day of standing beside an open grave. No one plans grief. Sometimes you get exactly what you did plan in life only to discover that it has overwhelmed your life and taken you to places you did not plan. So we all know about detours.

When you find that your life is not where you want it to be, like the Hebrews who longed to return to Jerusalem, you want your life back on track as soon as possible. In chapter twenty-eight of the book of Jeremiah, we are told that a false prophet named Hananiah got the people excited by assuring them that this exile would not last long. He claimed to have a revelation from God that would make their detour through Babylon short. But the Word of the Lord came to say, "No, there is no quick way back home."

Whenever I am driving across town in a hurry, I have an overwhelming desire to try an unproven shortcut that really should work. Like Hananiah, I think I have a revelation of a faster way that no one else can see. But a couple of miles into the shortcut, I realize that I just made the trip longer. Even my detours have detours. That could be the title of all the devotional journals I have written.

I didn't graduate from college with a plan to wind up as a pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church and a professor at Pittsburgh Seminary. It's a great job for me, but I certainly didn't have a plan to get here. I started out as a high school Social Studies teacher. After my first year, the principal told me I was doing a wonderful job of talking to my students about life. But unfortunately, the school was paying me to talk about the French Revolution, and I never got around to that. He then suggested—strongly—that I didn't have a career in teaching high school, and I should come up with some new plans. I was devastated at the time, but now I'm really thankful that I bombed as a Social Studies teacher. Without that failure, I would have never gone to seminary. With lots of weaves and turns into different places, I finally landed here four years ago. There were no short cuts. But there were lots of detours. Along the way I have learned an awful lot. In fact, everything was learned along the way. For example, along the way I discovered that God takes detours very seriously.

The well-known Presbyterian pastor Dick Halverson used to conclude worship services by saying, “You go nowhere by accident.” That little phrase goes to the heart of the doctrine of providence. God doesn’t have accidents. This means that nothing is wasted. There is no wasted time, experience, or hurt. God can use everything, which is just another reason why God is God. Even when we use our freedom to race down the wrong street in life, we cannot race our way beyond the reach of a God who owns all the roads. God owns the road to Jerusalem and the road to Babylon.

So the real question is not: Are you on the right road today? The real question is: Are you being faithful to your mission in life even when you think you’re lost on a detour? You are not lost to God. And God has a calling for your life today, wherever it may be. God does not wait until we arrive in the right place to give us a calling. The right place to be called is where we are today.

After dismissing Hananiah’s illusions of a shortcut out of exile, the prophet Jeremiah gave the calling of the Lord to the Hebrews in Babylon. “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters.... Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you in exile and pray on its behalf for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”(29:5-7) There it is. That was their calling and ours as well. Plant yourself in the life you have been given, Jeremiah tells us. Build your home, raise your children, go to work, pick up your dry cleaning, fix dinner, and live your life.

Perhaps you were hoping for something more extraordinary or heroic. But from the perspective of heaven, nothing is more heroic than quiet acts of faithful living conducted day after day, even when you can envision another place to be. You may not want to be in your job, or living alone. You may not want to be in Pittsburgh, or living at home with your parents, or living at home with your adult children. But for today, you are. So now what? Will you choose to live there well, with a grateful heart?

Will you seek the welfare of the city where God has sent you? Remember, you are not here by accident. Part of your calling is to care for our city. This phrase “seek the welfare” in the Hebrew is “shalom,” which means peace and restoration. Will you seek the restoration of Pittsburgh? The city is not here for you. You are here for the city. That’s the way calling works. It is easy to complain about what the city doesn’t provide, but to live faithfully to the Word of the Lord is to do something to help the city. Certainly to pray for it. “For in its welfare,” Jeremiah promises, “you will find your welfare.”

Then in verse eleven, Jeremiah gives us one of the most beautiful verses of the Bible. “Surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” This verse probably hangs on the walls of as many homes as any other. It provides great reassurance by telling us that in God’s way and timing, a future filled with hope will unfold. We all need that hope. But this verse cannot be pulled apart from the verses that preceded it which call us to live faithfully in ordinary ways.

Biblical hope does not turn your face away from the present. Hope allows you to return to today believing that tomorrow is safely in the hands of God. Only then are you free to see that every day is filled with grace and holy beauty. And that is what gives us joy, one ordinary day at a time. One evening last week after finishing the dishes, I sat on the porch and helped one of our little guys do his math homework. It was such a beautiful day to sit beside such a beautiful boy. I was overcome with a profound joy, and it occurred to me that there was absolutely nothing that I would rather be doing at that moment. I almost stood up to sing the Doxology right there over the math homework.

Once you start to pay attention to the grace of God breaking into your life, you begin to participate in it. You become creative and even a little mischievous. You take piano lessons, buy a bicycle, get a puppy, redo your hair, or grow a beard. These are the little ways in which we squeeze all of the life out of the present day.

If you cannot find joy along the way, you certainly won't find it at the end of the journey. We think that joy comes from getting what we want, but more often it comes from surprises. Like being on a road that you thought was a detour only to discover that it was the road to salvation.

The great enemy to joy is our anxiety about the future. "Am I at the right place? Am I with the right people? Am I going to have enough?" All that anxiety fills our hearts, leaving no room for joy. When we are anxious, we miss the surprising ways that grace breaks into the day. And that means we miss the beauty of our lives. Without beauty, there is no joy.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says, "When you have two loaves of bread, sell one and buy a lily." It will only last a day. But that is really all you have. Amen.