

An Amazing Detour

Part 5 of Sermon Series:

Surprise! The Unexpected Acts of God

a sermon based on

Acts 16:9-15

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As I begin, I want to assure you that I have asked Susan's (my wife's) permission to teasingly share the following story, even though (This may surprise you married couples.) we have a little bit of disagreement about the accuracy. So just to be clear: I have her permission; my version is accurate with maybe a wee bit of exaggeration for effect. Got it? Okay.

The day was August 21, 2017. {Look and point at wife. "Right?" When she agrees continue} {as an aside to the congregation} See, I told you my version was right. It was August 21, 2017. A beautiful Monday, Susan and I had decided to use that day for a day trip to southern Illinois. Carbondale, to be specific. The sun was shining with a few wispy clouds and an outside chance of some cloud cover in the late morning or early afternoon.

The drive started out easy. However, once we got south of Springfield we found ourselves in a steady stream of cars heading south (both on the interstate and the two lane highways). Few cars were heading north. Then it happened.

I'm a believer that you stop the car when you need gas, and that you take care of all the other "business" then and then only. That means you adjust your fluid consumption accordingly. My wife... not so much. She insists that we stop a wee bit more frequently. Something I'm sure none of you have to deal with. Right?

So here we are in this long line of traffic which is throwing us off schedule to get to Carbondale in time, and she wants to stop. Not only can I not find a gas station on the right side of the road, I still wonder how I will get back into this long line of cars. Traffic was really that thick. Meanwhile, she's monitoring the weather on her phone. I looked at the GPS and noticed that there was a park about a mile and a half away. So I told her, that we could pull off there so that she could use the facilities.

That is the moment that our plans changed. That is the moment for a most fortuitous detour. That park in little De Soto, Illinois was perfect. There was a clear view of the sky. Even though it wasn't in the direct path of totality for the impending solar eclipse, it was close. So we decided to stay there.

It was great. In this tiny town others had stopped without the crowding that was certainly occurring in Carbondale where I'd actually worried about where we would park. We visited with people in the park who had stopped nearby. One family had a daughter who was in the SIU stadium in Carbondale updating her with text messages about the NASA presentation that was being shown there as we all awaited the eclipse.

We had our special eclipse glasses and would take glimpses as the moon moved slowly between earth and the sun. I can remember looking at that moment when the sun became a sliver; then, a dot; and then just vanished. When I pulled down my glasses (it had to have been the same moment as the rest of those in that park) there was an audible but quiet gasp of awe that resounded through the park. I still get goosebumps each time I think about it. It was indescribable. The photos, the videos we've all seen don't even come close to showing what a total eclipse looks like when you are standing there looking at the sun's corona bursting out around the moon's shadowy disk. It's a moment I will treasure; a moment I got to experience with my wife. It's a moment I got to experience with a crowd in De Soto, Illinois because my wife insisted that we take a wee detour.

Here's the thing. After it was over and people began to talk with one another, the woman who'd been texting with her daughter in Carbondale shared, that clouds had obscured the sun just a few minutes before totality until a few minutes after it had passed.

Without **THAT** detour – that amazing detour – we would have missed it.

In that passage from Acts, we hear that Paul had a vision during the night in which he was encouraged to visit Macedonia. At first thought, this might seem like simple narrative. Let me put this in some perspective.

This was during Paul's second missionary journey. He hadn't even had an idea of going anywhere near Macedonia when he began the trip. In Acts 15:36, "Paul said to Barnabas, 'Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.'" The plan was to visit the churches in Asia: Lystra, Iconium, and Smryna; then, back down to Crete. He invited Timothy along because – as it says in Acts 16:2 – "He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium."

Paul started out with Timothy and some others. (Barnabas had decided to take Mark with him to Cyprus [Acts 15:39]) Paul and Timothy started out, but instead "They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been (as the Scripture says) forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." (Acts 16:6) I suspect that Paul was initially frustrated by this most "unfortunate" detour. He wouldn't get to visit the friends he had made in Asia. He wouldn't get to spend time with those with whom he had shared the news of salvation in Jesus Christ. We wouldn't get the chance he'd hoped for to see if we were continuing to allow Jesus to come between them and there sin like the moon between the sun so that the corona – that beautiful halo of sainthood that God has intended for each one of us but which is so often obscured – might be revealed. That's what he wanted to see. But the Spirit prevented that. God can sure mess up our plans sometimes. Can't he?

Instead, this detour leads him to Philippi, where he meets "A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of the Lord." (Acts 16:14) "A worshipper of the Lord" probably means that Lydia was not born a Jew, but rather a convert who desired to love God. Ammonius of Alexandria, writing in the third century, notes that when we hear about her heart being opened as she eagerly listened to Paul, that she like Cornelius revealed that God's grace isn't limited to some and not others, that instead the freedom he offers us means that for those who seek him and seek to live righteously – he will bring salvation into their lives.¹

Lydia was a fortunate woman. I mean fortunate by worldly standards. Traders in purple cloth tended to be wealthy. Yet, her wealth didn't obscure her humility. She had to be an influential woman, because we hear that she and her household were baptized. (Something extraordinary for a woman.) Then she insisted that if Paul found her faithful in the Lord that he "come and stay at (her) home." In Luke's words, "And she prevailed upon us." (Acts 16:15) This was not a woman to mess with. But through her, Paul was introduced to the people of Philippi where the Philippian church was born. Think of all the consequences that followed. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice." (Phil. 4:4)

Ronnie and Kamal have hopes for Kameron. (All parents do.) Today, though we don't know what detours God has in mind for him. Let us all hope and pray that he might grow to learn to humbly accept those detours so that he does miss out on God's blessing by allowing his own ambitions or those expectations put upon him cloud over the opportunities God has in store for him.

Likewise, for our graduates. As you go onto college or continue college somewhere else, don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed or frustrated when a roadblock appears forcing you to rethink your route. God just might have something in store for you that you never could have imagined. Start asking around. You'll find in this room people who thought they knew what they were going to do at eighteen or nineteen or even twenty years old, but have found joy and purpose somewhere else. Maybe it was a career change or a change of major. Seek to be like Lydia asking only to be found faithful in the Lord.

It's a reminder to all of us – not to be flakey or as Paul says in Ephesians, "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming." (Eph 4:14) – but because of our faithfulness to be willing

to yield to the opportunities God casts our way, even when it goes against what we think we want.

I still don't want to detour for pit stops; but at the same time, I don't want to miss out on something amazing that God might reveal in what seems to be a detour. AMEN.

¹ Francis Martin and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Acts*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 5 (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2006), 201.