

## Finding Our Way (Nehemiah 9:16-20; Acts 18:24-26; John 14:1-6)

In the opening chapter of her book entitled Travel Tips from a Reluctant Traveler, Jeannette Clift George, told a little story. She wrote, "My cousins live in Asheville, North Carolina, where Jesse is a prominent surgeon. He is a fine man, a very gracious man, a very loving man, but a man who doesn't like cats. His wife, Frances, is a delightful person who loves cats. One day, a little neighbor girl ran crying to their house. Her cat had climbed up a tall, slender tree and couldn't get down. Jesse thought that was a good place for a cat to be, but following Frances' gentle persuasion, he said, 'Let's see what we can do to help.' The two of them decided that Frances, who is of small stature, would grab the lower part of the tree and work it down until the topmost branches reached Jesse. Then Jesse, who is quite tall, would scoop the frightened cat from the top of the tree to safety. Their plan worked well at first. Frances grabbed the part of the tree within her reach and pulled it toward her. The tree tipped down like a thirsty giraffe, bearing a tiny passenger on its head. The branches were almost to Jesse when Frances lost her grip! Whoom! The tree slipped from Frances' hands and sprang away with such great force that the cat was flung into space! Catapulted! Claws out! Eyes wide! Approaching a certain but unknown destiny. The little girl was crushed, but the shock of her beloved cat's mode of departure stopped her sobbing. Frances was overcome by guilt because she and Jesse had lost the little girl's cat. Jesse tried not to laugh....A few days later, Frances was in the grocery store and noticed a friend pushing a grocery cart with cat food in it. She knew that her friend's husband didn't like cats any more than Jesse did. 'I see you have cat food. Do you have a cat?' she asked. Her friend stopped, looked around to be sure no one else could hear, and said that the strangest thing happened. She said that she and her husband were sitting in the backyard when all of a sudden, out of nowhere, a cat landed at their feet! She said that her husband looked at the cat and then at her. He said, 'Maude, the Lord has sent us a cat!'"

Now, after telling this story, the author had something to say about it. She wrote, "The story gives me insight into the dilemma...and the bewilderments I often find in life. I identify with that cat!"

Don't we all! It seems like life is constantly flinging us out into uncharted space. In the blink of an eye, we find ourselves somewhere we never

thought we'd be, and we're not quite sure how we got there. Inside we feel like that cat—claws out, eyes bulging, gasping for air, wondering if we're going to land on soft ground or a thorn tree!

Sometimes it seems like it would be so nice to go back to the days of our Older Testament, when God led the Hebrews out of Egypt and through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. Using a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, God led the people, clearly showing them the way they were to go.

Wouldn't it be nice if God would do the same for us today? Just think, if you got out of bed in the morning and there was that pillar of cloud, and all you had to do was follow it. If it led you to the doctor, you'd know that you needed to see a doctor. If it led you to a certain school, you'd know that you were to get an education or a job there. Or, say at night, when the pillar of fire took over, if you followed it, it might lead you to the man or woman who would be your best partner in life.

Yes, it would be nice, because our lives get so hectic, so frantic, so confusing. We have so many choices, so many competing loyalties, so many changes coming at us, so many things to do, so many pressures, so many temptations that all just seem to catapult us from one place to another haphazardly.

Jesus' disciples no doubt had their claws out and bulging eyes, feeling as if they were helplessly being catapulted somewhere, they knew not where, when on his last night with them, Jesus told them that he would soon be leaving them. But Jesus told them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

And when Thomas, claws out, eyes wide open in panic, objected, but "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus responded, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14).

Before the followers of Jesus became known as Christians, they identified themselves as followers of The Way. That's why, in today's reading from The Acts of the Apostles, about those first days after Jesus ascended into heaven, it states that Apollos, a Jew who was a native of Alexandria, had been instructed in "the Way."

Now, apparently Apollos was enthusiastic about believing in Jesus, and yet, he didn't quite understand who Jesus was and how he had lived. So, according to the scripture, two followers of Jesus named Priscilla and Aquila "took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately" (Acts 18).

We don't know exactly what Priscilla and Aquila said to Apollos, but I imagine that they wanted him to understand that if we want to arrive at that closeness to God that Jesus spoke of on his last night with his disciples, it's not enough to just believe in him. We also have to live our lives the way Jesus lived his life on earth.

Let's face it, believing in Jesus is easy, well, relatively easy—easier certainly than living the way he lived his life. Remember the story of Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler. The Rich Young Ruler, like Apollos, was all excited about following Jesus on the way to the presence of God, until he learned that it wasn't enough to just believe in Jesus. Jesus told him that he had to give away his riches, for he was too focused on them—more focused on them than on living the right way, Jesus' way, a way more concerned with people and relationships than things. In the end, the Rich Young Ruler wanted to keep his riches more than he wanted to live the way Jesus lived, and thus he was not able to travel the way that led to closeness to God. He believed in Jesus, but he wasn't willing to live the way Jesus lived.

If we want to follow the way of living modeled by Jesus, the way that leads to closeness with God, it's important that we believe in Jesus, but there are several other things we need to do.

First, it's important that we remove any stumbling blocks that might be keeping us from going forward, such as a desire for riches or fame. They may come to us on the way of the Lord, and if they do, well, and good, but they should not be our primary concern, for they can trip us up. Other

stumbling blocks that can keep us from drawing close to God are selfishness, envy, anger, resentment, being unforgiving. So as we travel, we must constantly be trying to remove all such stumbling blocks and become better persons, more godly persons.

Second, as we travel the road to God, we need to be like the Good Samaritan. We need to stop and help others along the way. Jesus always stopped to help people as he walked along. As we travel the way of Jesus, we too must see people as more important than things, rules, traditions, or agendas. We must be concerned about helping others get on the road to closeness with God with us, and we must do all we can to remove whatever stumbling blocks are in their way. Jesus lived his life smoothing the road for others, clearing obstacles that kept them from finding their way to God and always inviting them to join the band of pilgrims on the road to closeness with God--the way to the presence of God.

Third, we must expect that at times the journey will be difficult. Some of the people we try to help may turn against us. At any time, out of the blue, we may be catapulted off the road by cancer, divorce, the loss of employment, or even addiction. But it's important that we always work to find our way back to the way and then try to stay on the way, even when the road turns uphill. We may have to sacrifice to lighten the load to make the climb. But it's important that we persevere, keeping our eyes on the goal, that precious closeness with God.

Preacher Janice Hearn once told of a couple who modeled perseverance, staying on the way of God, the way to God, even when life got difficult. She said, "A couple in one church I served were a model of this. By the time I knew them, Bob was full of cancer. But Bob wasn't going to take cancer sitting down. He was God's man. That he spent much time being comforted and nourished simply in the presence of God was clear. But he was also a man on the move, climbing the difficult trail of life. We worked together on an evangelism team. Bob was the one who pulled the team together. His personal life was rock-strewn, and painfully rough because of the cancer. But he wasn't worried or troubled by the cancer. Four days before Bob died, he called and asked me to come for tea. He told me the story of their life: a teenaged daughter murdered, a brother killed in a plane crash, two sons-in-law dead of cancer, another brother with Alzheimer's. You see the point.

Directions for how to get through this would not have helped. A map, even when studied and followed, would not have helped this man and his family to get through the mud and over the rocks of their lives. But they knew the secret. A person who went with them on the trail. They walked with Jesus."

Yes, friends, when we're traveling the right road in life, traveling the way Jesus walked, he himself walks with us, our constant guide and companion. We may not have God's pillar of cloud and fire to guide us through the days of our lives, but we have something even better. We have God's Son, who loves each one of us as the "apple of his eye."

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred under the Nazis, often challenged his students and congregation by saying, "Who is Jesus Christ for you today?" May we know and every day tell those who journey through life around us that Jesus is the Way we are to live our lives, the Way to closeness with the God who created us and loves us, and the One who travels with us. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; January 11, 2009