

It's a Good Thing the Women Were Along to Ask Directions

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Luke 3:7-18

For some reason a good handful of us from my church youth group ended up going to the same Presbyterian college up in Spokane, Washington. Between all of us we usually only had one or two working cars at any given time, so when we went home for holidays we often traveled together. Most of the time we took I-90 straight across Idaho and Montana, then dropped down through Wyoming on I-25 and into Colorado, but every once in a while when we were feeling adventurous we would go a different route. One Christmas break we went down through Idaho on I-84. Late one night, or maybe it was early one morning, we were tired and hungry and ready for a break, so we got off the highway in Boise to grab something to eat at a Denny's we found not too far from the exit.

As we got ready to leave we asked our waiter for directions back to the interstate, and a blank look crossed his face. Then he called over another couple of servers and a brief conference ensued between them. Now, mind you, this was before the days when a multitude of restaurants and convenience stores were clustered at most exits, but not much before. We couldn't have been that far from the interstate. No more than a half-mile or so. It seemed strange that it would take that many minds to figure out how to get us back on our way. Finally, the conference ended and our waiter came back to us. "So," he said, "you think there's a highway around here?"

If you are going to ask directions, it's a good idea to ask someone who actually knows how to get there.

This is the time of year when we are all trying to find our way to the manger through a maze of holiday shopping, parties, year-end projects due at work, and sometimes, complicated and messy family situations. Some years it seems doubtful that we will ever get there.

We aren't the first ones to try to find our way there, of course. In a couple of weeks we'll remember the story of three important, impressive men who traveled a great distance to find the baby in the manger, finally stopping by the royal palace in Jerusalem to ask directions.

And today's story is about a lost multitude that made its way out into the wilderness in search of the manger. Only they were so lost that they didn't even know what they were looking for. They just knew they were looking, and they thought that John might be just the one to get them where they needed to go.

Now, John wasn't dim-witted like the wait staff at Denny's apparently was that cold winter's night nearly 30 years ago, but he wasn't much more helpful than they were: "You can't get there from here," he told them. "Not the way you're going, at least."

He had an interesting name for the path they had been on. He called it the "who's your daddy?" road. Ancestry was nearly as important to the Jews as it is to Southerners, but the curious thing about them was that if you asked them about their lineage, they would eventually all say the same thing: Abraham is our father. And sure enough, their family portraits would show their common patriarchal heritage – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all of Jacob's sons who eventually immigrated to Egypt. But when they said that Abraham was their father, they also meant something else: their religious heritage; their devout religious practice, based on the Law of Moses. Their strict observance of the Sabbath, their sacrificial rites, their trips to the Temple for all of the festivals.

When they said that they were children of Abraham, it's like us saying that we are life-long Presbyterians, or that you were in church every Sunday and had been an elder twice and taught Sunday School for 20 years and sang in the choir – and assuming that it was the doing of all that that made you religious, spiritual, safe.

And that's when John said you can't get there from here. The road you're on isn't the road that will get you where you want to go. You want a road that leads to life and peace and God, and this isn't it.

“Well, how do we get there, then?” they finally asked, the crowd, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. “Tell us where we should go.” “The road you want to be on is the road to the manger,” John tells them. That isn't exactly how he put it, obviously. In fact what he tells them is interesting. They want to know how to get close to God, the way of peace and wholeness, and what we would now call salvation, and instead of telling them to pray more or go to church more, or to do anything that we might call religious, he tells all three groups essentially the same thing: don't take advantage of your position, your power in society and the world, and be content with what you have. Keep what you need – **need** – and give away everything else. Level the playing field. It's part stewardship, part social justice. Look after the poor and hungry, treat everyone fairly and respectfully, and don't be a greedy pig. **You** don't need everything you have, but other people do. He might just as well have handed out bumper stickers that say “Live simply so that others can simply live.”

It's an interesting message for a preacher, don't you think? There's nothing overtly spiritual or Christian about what he's telling them, nothing to distinguish it from any other philanthropic or humanitarian organization. It doesn't sound too different from what Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie go around saying: “Do good. Make the world a better place.” In fact, even agnostics and atheists would say the same thing. So what's the difference? Surely John is saying more than that the secret to life is to be good, morally and ethically upright people who build decent, affordable housing and provide mosquito netting for children in Africa? Surely the way of Jesus is different than the way of the Peace Corps, or Ghandi?

Remember what he's telling them: the road you seek is the road to the manger. A manger. What they are looking for is to be found in a barn, and in the form of a baby. Phillip Britts was a British poet, horticulturist, and apparently a pretty fine theologian, too. He wrote that “Christ didn't spring armed from the head of Zeus...he wasn't even born in the protection of a royal court, with soldiers to guard against intruders and physicians to guard against sickness. Rather, he was born in a stable, at the mercy of Herod and the stark elements of cold and dirt.” Jesus was born in a stable! He “laid down” his power. He gave up every shred of strength and authority and glory that he had, and became completely obedient to and dependent on God. He was born, and lived in utter dependence on God – humility, simplicity, obedience, trust.

The manger, the tiny, helpless baby – they become our model for living. In fact, Britt says that “true [spiritual] activity is [nothing more than] surrender and obedience.” If it's all about our religious fervor and activity, then we can convince ourselves that we are the ones who have attracted God, we have lured God down, gotten God to love us; we have earned God's love. But if we let go of everything that smacks of self-sufficiency, of power, of independence, then we are able to see the truth of the manger, the Incarnation: it is God who first loved us. It is God who has come to us. And this is the part that makes this road so difficult and yet so exciting to take: it is in emptying ourselves the way Jesus did, in what Britt calls “the complete abandonment of human strength” that we are set free. The way of the manger is the way of peace and salvation.

One final quote from Britt: “In obediently following this path we are released from the servitude of our own desires, our selfish hopes and fears – we are redeemed and become free.”

This passage begins with John calling his audience a brood of vipers, and some other not-so-thinly-veiled threats, and then at the end Luke writes, “so with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news.” Good News? Being called bad names and told that the axe and fire are waiting for you seems like a strange definition of good news, doesn’t it? But I suppose that whether or not it’s good news depends on what you do with it. If you take offense and go home in a huff and never change course, then no, the news isn’t good at all. But if you follow his directions, it is, indeed, good news and it leads to hope, and redemption, and freedom.