



Getting Free and Staying Free

March 9, 2025

The top 10 things one might hear on a road trip, starting with number 10...just like David Letterman used to do it:

10. I call shotgun!
9. Where's the snacks?
8. I spy with my little eye... Or "Can we play a game?"
7. Are we lost?
6. Let's sing 100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall!
5. Look at that!
4. Can we listen to my music?
3. I'm hungry!
2. I need to use the bathroom!

And the number one thing you might hear on a road trip is? Any guesses?

1. Are we there yet?

Today we begin a new sermon series for Lent entitled "Are We There Yet?" And this title reflects on the impatience and anxiety we often feel at the beginning of a journey, whether it's a road trip or like Lent, the beginning of a spiritual journey. As a kid, I remember asking that question a time or two, "**Are we there yet?**"

Because like my Dad and many others, I was driven (pardon the pun) by the belief that reaching the destination would be better than the journey itself. But this intense focus on reaching the goal or arriving can sometimes lead to disappointment when the destination doesn't live up to all the hype or expectations.

Scientists call that pattern of thinking the "arrival fallacy".

It is when we think the next thing, once we get the next thing done, THEN we will be happy and feel satisfied. Once we overcome that hurdle, finish school or this obstacle, get a new job...or reach that goal. Then we'll know bliss.

So, instead of being stuck in that pattern of asking over and over "Are We There Yet?", we are going to try and savor our uniquely human experience over Lent, to move forward in Lent but without putting undue artificial pressure on ourselves.

But rather focus on God, focus on our relationship with the Lord, who is leading us each step of the way, sustaining us, guiding us and providing meaning and purpose and hope. Purpose and meaning through all the ups and downs, and U-turns, and rest stops, and fast-food drive throughs over the next 40 days.

So, in the words of my brother as I was growing up, **“Buckle up, Buttercup we are going for a ride!”**

I remember a time when I was just about to graduate from college. A significant time in every young adult’s life. Where we are asking the big questions of life... **“Now what?” “What are my next steps?”** Maybe even, **“God, what do you want me to do?”**

It was a long time ago and so I don’t remember all the details. But I do remember I felt a very clear sense from God that after graduation I was supposed to move down to the cities. Odd, I didn’t want to leave Bemidji...ever.

Somehow, that winter, when I came across this verse, **“The Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. Gen 12:1”** I just knew it was from God to me. I had peace I couldn’t explain.

God helped me get a car, find another Christian female graduate to live with, and moving went very smoothly.

But when I got all moved in, I panicked and complained! **“Now where am I going to work?!” And where am I going to go to church?!”**

And God provided again, immediately, with part-time work at a grocery store within walking distance of where I was renting and a small rural church my roommate attended.

But then God provided even more abundantly only two weeks later, full-time dream job in a bookstore! A bookstore on two floors, thought I’d died and gone to heaven. And that same month, God provided a wonderful church that honored women, believed in grace, believed in the Holy Spirit without getting weird, and emotional healing.

But even with a wonderful job and an even better church,

I still panicked again and was stressed again, crying out to God, **“Now what am I supposed to do?!”** And God provided.

It's kind of embarrassing, that as quickly as God provided somethings tailored made for me and with abundance, I was just as quick to forget God's faithfulness and provision for the next step in the journey.

That cycle of need, God's faithful and abundant provision, and then complete spiritual amnesia, completely forgetting in God's help...that should sound familiar to us. Because it is the pattern of the Israelites from our text this morning and it is a pattern they fall into over and over again in the Old Testament.

For today, the Israelites had just been delivered, freed from their bondage to the Egyptians (a huge miracle) but had only found bitter water to drink. So, they complained to Moses. So, Moses prayed. And God was faithful again and provided sweet water for them. The Israelites were wrapped up in their own concerns. It's part of being human, I get it. I've done it.

It was something I noticed in previous churches I served. When we would ask people to share their "Joys and Concerns" during the Sunday service, often the concerns outweighed the joys. And if I was going in for a hip or knee replacement, I would be asking for prayers too...that's a good thing. These things are our reality.

But sometimes, our concerns can sometimes dominate our other thoughts and feelings. Scientists have done studies on why we tend to do this. It is called having a "negativity bias".

The "negativity bias" is our very real tendency to not only register negative stimuli, to only see the negative side of things, to see what is wrong, but then also to dwell on these events. We tend to then fixate on them so much, narrow our vision so much, that we become blind to the good things God brings into our lives on a daily basis.

I knew a couple in Vergas who had a code word for when their spouses' negativity was ramping up too much. They'd say, "Change the channel." And that was supposed to clue the other to think on something else, as a way to keep their negativity in check, bring more balance.

Because we know the danger of the negativity bias, how it drains our energy, brings down our mood, and dominates our thoughts and time. How, if left unchecked, it can take our eyes off Jesus, it can steal our faith in God. Maybe even causing us to fail to trust or believe in the good future God wants for us. It can blind us to the good things God is doing and will do.

And, I for one, do not want to miss out on any of God's blessings. I don't want to miss out on the blessings God is giving us right now.

Let's just kick negativity, that negativity bias to the curb and help each other as a church keep our focus on our relationship with God.

As we look at this passage from Exodus, this experience of the Israelites comes immediately on the heels of the Israelites experiencing a HUGE miracle. In the previous couple of chapters of Exodus, God had protected them from the plagues, led them out of Egypt, delivered them safely through the Red Sea, and thwarted the Pharaoh's army completely.

Yet, so quickly, within three days, they move from praise to complaint.

It's easy to smirk at the Israelites. When will they learn? But, are there any ways we struggle just like the Israelites? How do our experiences here at BUMC, of challenges and then God's provision mirror the Israelites'?

And how is God's invitation to them to trust in God's provision also an invitation to us to trust in God's provision?

In verses 22 thru 24, we learn Moses had just led the Israelites through the Red Sea, into the desert. The only water they could find in three days of searching was bitter and undrinkable. So, they grumbled to Moses asking, "What are we to drink?"

Moses cried out in prayer to God and again God provided. God provided them the water they needed.

But in the next verse we read, **"There the Lord issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test. He said, "If you listen carefully to the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you."**

God put them to the test? God tested their faith and tested their trust in Him?

What an interesting thought.

Have you ever felt like God was testing you? Was there ever a season or a chapter in your life in which you had the sense that God was close and also watching how you were going to handle this next challenge?

What if, imagine this thought, what if God allows us to be tested by things in our lives? I am not sure I want to put too fine a point on this. I am not comfortable proclaiming, "God is testing us!"

But what if, because of what we learned about God in this text, what if we agreed that God allows us to be tested? Because God doesn't fix everything in our lives. What if God allows us to be tested by the normal stuff in our lives and in the world?

Because whether God does it specifically or simply allows it, it still seems like there is a response that God is calling forth from us. It seems like God is still asking something of us...in the allowing of difficulties to touch our lives. What if in those difficulties God asking, "What are you BUMC going to do with that?"

Are there difficulties that we are facing as a church or as a nation? For us we are facing staff changes by fall, needing new staff. And we have a need for more people to listen, **"If you listen carefully to the Lord your God and do what is right in his**

eyes”, and dream and plan together what we sense God is inviting us to become. What if in those difficulties God asking, “What are you BUMC going to do with that?”

And so, how do we want to respond? Do we want to be mistrusting and grumbly like those silly Israelites? Or perhaps we could choose a different response? One filled with faith and trust? Maybe more like Moses, in lifting our concerns to God in prayer?

And don't forget God provided. And God provided abundantly in verse 27. ”
Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.”

How interesting that we are just at the beginning of Lent, a season of reflection and repentance and renewal. And perhaps even a season of being tested and tried by life. A season of making choices in how we will respond and engage with God and with each other in the midst of our challenges.

Time of Reflection: Is there a challenge you are currently facing? In reflecting on God's faithfulness and abundance in caring for the Israelites, how would you like to respond to that challenging situation with God? As the Lord walks with you each step of the way?