

Sermon Series – Using Your GPS  
#1 – Acquiring Satellites  
Nov. 27, 2011  
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

My family and I decided not to travel to Jeffersonville for Thanksgiving this year. Usually we make the trek that direction to be with family, but this year we were deterred by the closing of the Sherman Minton Bridge. We've heard horror stories about the traffic going across from Kentucky to Indiana, and we had enough construction and detours in Chicago to last us three lifetimes.

Of course, navigating such travel obstacles has been made a lot easier by a recent invention: the global positioning system, or GPS. This little device has revolutionized how we get from one place to another. Remember when, if you wanted to know how to get somewhere, you had to unfold a map that went from the size of a postage stamp to the roughly the size of Delaware? And then once you found where you were going, you had to fold it back up, which usually took a Master's Degree in Engineering. And you had to do all of this while driving! And they say driving while talking on your cell phone is distracting.

I was a little late to get a GPS. I initially resisted, thinking I could find my way around using my man's intuition. You can guess how that went. I remember the final straw that drove me to get a GPS. I was driving in an unfamiliar part of Chicago to meet a friend for lunch. I had taken some basic directions with me, but figured I would call my friend when I got close and he could guide me from there. Except when I called, he didn't answer his phone. He was probably too busy trying to fold a map.

So I was stuck in unknown territory, trying to find a house for which I had an address but no earthly idea how to get there. In a flash of desperation, I called the one person I knew who could solve any problem: Judy, our church secretary. I told her I was lost, she said, "Using your man's intuition again, huh?" She got onto the Mapquest website, figured out where I was, and gave me directions. As I drove, she would say things like, "In 1.7 miles, turn left. In .5 miles, turn right." And as I listened, I thought to myself, "Boy, I wish someone would make a device that gave you an electronic map and told you when to turn in a nice, soothing church-secretary voice." The next day, I bought a GPS.

Today we start a new church year with the first Sunday of Advent. As we do so, we're embarking on a journey toward Bethlehem, one that will also provide detours and cause some wandering. We may think we've been down this road before; after all, Advent comes every year. But if we take this new year to be a new start, another chance to experience the miracle and wonder of Christmas, then we have to be willing to set aside all that we know and have experienced and set off on this trip to Bethlehem as if we don't quite know where we're going.

As we take another look at Mary and Joseph, we'll see that's exactly what they experienced. Both are called by angels to go on a new journey, not unlike God called Abraham way back in Genesis. They'll travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem and back, and then to Egypt to escape King Herod's wrath. And the magi will follow their own global positioning system – a star shining brightly in the night sky – to their destination. Right from the beginning, the gospels show us that following Jesus is indeed a journey.

It starts with the annunciation to Mary, which we read in today's scripture. This scene has been embellished and romanticized down through the ages, so much so that we are in danger of losing the ragged edges of the original story. There is nothing about this angelic appearance that

evokes a holiday spirit or a soft glow. This is a radical call from angel Gabriel to the virgin named Mary to go on a journey, much like God's call to Moses through the burning bush to stop being a shepherd and become the deliverer of the nation of Israel. Mary is also called to be a deliverer, but the package she bears is the Son of God.

This was not the journey Mary expected. If her life played out as was typical for young girls in those days, she wouldn't even need a map. She knew exactly what was in store for her: She was a poor teenager engaged to a local carpenter. Growing up in a Jewish household, she would have been taught a rigid code of standards and values. The model of womanhood held up by her society calls for a woman to be the wife of a God-fearing Jewish man, the mother of his children, and the maker of a loving and law-abiding home for her family. As far as Mary knows, that's exactly the route that has been mapped out for her.

Until Gabriel appears and offers her another direction. He tells her that she will be pregnant and will give birth to a boy named Jesus, the Son of the Most High, the royal ancestor of King David. Mary's response to the Gabriel is an understated question: "How can this be?" Part of the miracle of the story is that Mary shows such restraint. What about the other questions: What's going to happen to me? Will Joseph stick around? Will my parents still love me? Will my friends stand by me or will I get dragged into town and stoned to death? Will the pregnancy go all right? Will the labor be hard? Will there be someone to help me when my time comes? Will I know what to do? Why me?

But Mary asks none of those questions. Once Gabriel explains the process, Mary responds with the simplest yet most profound statement in the whole Bible: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." And with that humble, innocent assent, Mary has agreed to embark on this God-ordained journey that will lead her...well, she didn't know where it would lead her. But she knew she was going.

When I first got my GPS, I was excited to get put it to use. So when I got home, I sat on the couch and unpacked it. I didn't bother reading through the instructions – who needs those? Instead I turned it on and waited while it booted up and connected with its signal. I waited...and waited...and waited while the screen simply said, "Acquiring satellites." After about 10 minutes, I was about ready to pack up this defective piece of junk and take it back. I happened to glance at the instructions beside me which said, "Make sure your GPS is outside or near a window for direct access to the satellite connection." So I stood up, moved over by a window, and my defective piece of junk started working perfectly.

Every time I read this scripture I wonder why God chose this particular young girl. I'm sure God had a reason; God didn't just chose the first Joe and Mary in the phone book. But why her? She was young, poor, and female, all characteristics that people of her day would say made her junk, utterly unusable by God. She had nothing to offer to God except her availability and her willingness to serve. In other words, she was in the right position to receive and respond to God's call.

Are we? For my GPS to work, it had to be positioned in such a way as to receive the signal. For Mary to respond, her soul had to be positioned in such a way to receive God's call. That requires a spirit of openness and receptivity. If we use things like our schedules, our addictions, our materialism, our own self-doubts to build walls around our faith, God's signal may have trouble getting through. As we move into Advent, are we open to hearing what God has to say to us? Or will it be blocked by all the insulation and debris around us? Will it be drowned out by all the other noise?

I've always wondered how my GPS actually works. I know it involves sending and receiving signals from an orbiting satellite, but that's about as much as I care to know. But I've always wondered how I get the right signal. I mean, with the millions of GPSes in use around the world, how do I know the signals aren't getting crossed and I'm actually getting sent to Cleveland instead of Versailles?

In our lives, a lot of voices are clamoring for our attention, pretending to offer us guidance and direction. If you drive this, you'll be important. If you give your kids this, they'll be OK. If you take this, you'll feed good again. How do you know to which voice we should give our attention? How do we know we've got the right signal?

It starts right here, as we hear the stories of faith and absorb them into our souls. This first Sunday of a new church year is our opportunity to retune our focus, to turn down and tune out the counterfeit voices in our lives, and to acquire the signal from God that will guide us through our obstacles and the parts our lives that are still under construction. And as we tune into that signal, as we are intentional about listening to God's word given to us through scripture and prayer, we'll be able to respond in faith to following God.

That doesn't mean the journey will always be easy. On some navigational websites, when you get directions, you have the option of choosing the quickest route, or the route that avoids highways, or the most scenic route. When God guides us, wouldn't it be nice if we could choose the route with the least amount of sacrifice, or the most painless route, or the route with the best outcome? Mary wasn't given that choice. And yet, she responded, "Here am I."

Of course, we have a choice, just like Mary did. She could have said, "No." When our GPS gives us directions, we can always rely on our intuition and say, "Nope. I don't want to do that. I'm going to go my own way." People have been saying that to God for centuries. Maybe you've said it a time or two yourself. "No thanks, God. I know what I'm doing. I don't need your help." How has that worked out for you?

As we move into Advent, as we start on this journey that will lead us to the manger, I pray that we stay attuned to the source of our signal, that we stay open to the words and movement of God in our midst, that we lock into the promise of the coming Christ child and the call to follow him. As Mary says at the end of her song of praise, the Magnificat: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." Here are we, God. Guide us once again to your son, Jesus Christ.