

Using Our GPS Sermon Series  
#2 – Recalculating Our Route  
Matthew 1:18-25  
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

Today we continue our Advent sermon series called “Using Our GPS,” or God’s Positioning System. The idea is that as we move toward Christmas we are on a journey, and our world provides us all kinds of detours and roadblocks to try and get us off-track. Last week we talked about how important it is to acquire the right signal to guide us forward, just as a GPS must acquire a satellite signal. Mary got her signal from the angel Gabriel and responded with profound trust and faith with the simple statement, “Here am I.”

Once you acquire a signal, you should be on your way. But sometimes the question to ask is, “On your way to where?” and even a technological gadget like our GPS isn’t immune to making mistakes. I was using my GPS one time to find a remote church camp in rural Illinois. I was far off the interstate in completely unknown territory, fully reliant upon my little hunk of metal and wires to get me to my destination. I took all the right turns, dutifully obeying the voice commands, even when they sent me down an unmarked dirt road. The road dead-ended into a cornfield, at which point my GPS proclaimed, “Your destination is ahead.” I think I detected a bit of a chuckle when it said that. So I shouted at it, “No it’s not!” I wasn’t at my destination, I was at a dead end.

I think God must love dead ends, because it gives God a chance to show us a new direction. Abraham and Sarah, who are supposed to be fruitful and multiply, are burdened with barrenness. Dead end. Moses led the Israelites to the shores of the Red Sea, but couldn’t get across. Dead end. Jesus, the supposed Messiah gets crucified and buried in a tomb. Dead end. In each case, the story could have ended right there, staring at a road that ends in a cornfield instead of at our destination.

That could have happened for Joseph, as well. To fully understand just how off-track Joseph’s life becomes, consider where he starts. As our story begins, Joseph was pledged to be married to Mary. This is more than a simple engagement, as we understand it. This is a betrothal, a year-long commitment between a man and woman that carried with it all the binding agreements of a marriage, but without the consummation. At the end of one year in betrothal, the couple was formally married.

So Joseph and Mary were in all senses committed to each other to be married. But when Mary returns from her three-month visit to her relative Elizabeth, Joseph discovers his wife is four months along in a pregnancy that she claims was initiated by the Holy Spirit. Wouldn’t you have liked to be privy to that conversation! “Honey, I’ve got some good news and I’ve got some bad news. The bad news is, I’m pregnant and you’re not the father. But the good news is, neither is anybody else!” If you were Joseph, how do you respond to this? He wasn’t quite sure what happened with Mary, he only knew it had nothing whatsoever to do with him.

This was not the life he had planned. He was going to marry Mary, build them a modest house, ply his trade as a carpenter, and have a house full of kids – that were his. There are no exit ramps on that road, no detours or scenic overlooks. You start on the road, you stay on that road, you make it to the end of the road.

How many of our lives have worked like that? How many of us are on the exact path on which we started, a path free from speedbumps and obstacles? I would guess no one. For example, people usually change their majors three or four times, and that's before the journey really begins. I was all prepared to be a doctor until I took my first undergrad chemistry course, and all of a sudden communications looked a lot more appealing. The truth is that our lives are not defined by what we think is going to happen; our lives are defined by what actually happens while we were waiting for something else to happen!

That's certainly true for Joseph. He is thrown for a curve when he finds out about Mary's pregnancy, at which point his road forks into two choices. He can either divorce her publicly, bringing her shame and possibly even death, or he could divorce her quietly, which might save him some face and also protect Mary's dignity. While he's consider Route A or Route B, God comes in a dream to offer Route C. As my GPS would say, "Recalculating." Did you notice that when the angel comes to Mary, she's wide awake, but when the angel comes to Joseph, it's while he's asleep? I wonder if God knew that was the only time Joseph would really listen and not ask too many questions.

Joseph's life is recalculated by God's plan, but in most cases the rerouting we experience is caused by one of two things. The first cause of getting off-track is ourselves. Sometimes we make bad decisions, and those decisions cause us to stray from the path and head down dark alleys or winding roads. There have been several times when my GPS has told me to go one way, but I just knew there was a better way, so rather than staying connected to the signal, I've wandered off-track. And my GPS is always there to help me find my way once I get myself lost. Thankfully, my GPS doesn't say what she probably wants to say: "Hey idiot! If you would have turned where I told you to turn, we wouldn't be in this mess!" Instead, she just politely says, "Recalculating." God could chastise us for not following directions, for not spending enough time reading the map, for brazenly thinking we knew better. But God doesn't. God simply offers to get us back on track. It may require some extra twists and turns, it may take us down roads we weren't planning on going, but the whole point is to get us heading in the right direction.

Sometimes, the rerouting of our lives has nothing to do with us, but is caused by the capricious circumstances of life. We are motoring along, windows down and radio up, coasting on cruise control, when we're unwillingly sent down a new path by a doctor's diagnosis or a plummeting economy, and before we know it there's a dirt road under our feet and a cornfield in front of us. Dead end.

But we don't worship the God of dead ends. We worship that God of rolled-away stones, of parted seas, of recalculated routes. Remember, the whole point of a GPS recalculating our route is to get us back on the right path. That's true, no matter how far off course we get. There is nowhere on this earth we can go that is out of reach of God's signal. No matter how many wrong turns we take, no matter how many dead ends we run into, God is always there with us, recalculating our route, offering us the opportunity to trust in God for guidance. God has given us the tools we need to get on track: God's word as presented to us in scripture, a community of faith in which to find worship, comfort and challenge, even our own consciences, which can help us sort out right from wrong. The tools are there; it's up to us whether we use them or not.

Thankfully, Joseph listens to God's rerouting. Instead of divorcing Mary, he follows through with God's plan. That took a lot of trust, just like it takes a lot of trust to blindly follow the directions of our GPS. I'm sure Joseph still had a lot of questions. How would this affect his business? His marriage? What would he be to this baby? A father or a stepfather or a foster father? If Joseph believes the angel, everything is full speed ahead. The story can continue. Mary will have a home and a family and her child will be born into the line of King David. But if Joseph doesn't believe, if he decides to go his own way, then the journey ends here. If he wakes up from his dream, shakes his head, and goes to the courthouse to file the divorce papers, then Mary is an outcast forever and the future is in question.

For the working out of God's plan, Joseph's belief is as important as Mary's womb, because it is Joseph's decision whether or not to give this child a name that will determine the child's fate. By choosing to name the child, Joseph would exercise his right as the father and acknowledge Jesus as his legal son. Will this righteous, intensely conflicted man speak the name of Jesus? Interestingly, we are never told what he says. We are only told what he does. Despite the consequences, despite the chaos, despite the detour, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him.

Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor says this about Joseph: "The heart of the story is about a just man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked: his wife pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked. It is about a righteous man who surveys a mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with and decides to believe that God is present in it. He owns this mess, he legitimates it and gives it a name, and the mess becomes the place where new life is born."

Joseph's journey is often our journey. We are presented day after day after day with circumstances beyond our control, circumstances we would never have chosen for ourselves, tempted to divorce ourselves from the belief that God can lead us out of this mess, when an angel whispers in our ear: "Do not fear. God is here. It may not be what you had planned, but God may be born here, too, if you will speak his name."

Really? We have a say in whether or not God is incarnated this Christmas? Oh yes, we sure do. We have the choice whether to let the circumstances of life and the consequences of our bad decisions set our direction, or whether we're going to trust God to recalculate our route, to get us back on track to a life of faith and grace and generosity. I once was lost – at a cornfield in rural Illinois, among other times in my life. But now I'm found, praise be to God. May we all be found again this Christmas.

