

You Can't Get There From Here

Deuteronomy 34: 1-9 Acts 16: 6-10

The way I heard it, a car pulls up to an old New England Yankee and asks how to get to Leicester (pronounced “Lester,” or better “Lestah,” for non-Yankees). The old Yankee rubs his chin and shakes his head, “Nope, yah can’t get theyah from heyah.” If you’ve been in New England, or any backwoods hill country, the methodology for getting from one town to another can seem a bewildering maze, and one would sometimes think the old Yankee was right, yah simply can’t get theyah from heyah.

Of course, there is almost always a way to get there from here, but it may be convoluted, confusing, dangerous, or unpleasant. Any of those reasons could make it seem like a truism that you can’t get there from here.

The point is that there is a way, like it or not, to get there. However, it is essential to know two things in this case. First, what is your starting point? Second, what is your ending point or destination?

The point where you start needs to be defined. You go to Google maps and want directions to get some place, any place, the first question is the starting point.

This would seem easy enough and, in a geographical context, naming your starting point shouldn’t be much of an issue. If your journey is non-geographical, like what direction am I going to take with my life, your starting point may not seem that clear. Self evaluation, assessments of resources, and other considerations may influence your understanding of your starting point. Failing to make accurate assessments in the beginning ends up creating problems later.

The common mistake in small business start-ups is capitalization, how much money the business owner possesses in order to weather the slow times, and knowing those slow times could come in the beginning when you’re still trying to build up the business. If the business is under-capitalized, they probably won’t make it past the first year. The flaw is in believing that the business plan will create the reality desired whereas the reality determines the progress and success of the plan. You can change a plan, but you can’t change reality. Wrong assumptions can kick in at the starting point.

The second problem can be a poorly defined destination, or even an undefined destination. Literally, you have no idea when you’ve fulfilled your goal because it got misidentified. Maybe it was accurate in the beginning, but maybe it never adapted to changing circumstances – this is the most likely scenario.

Remember, IBM was best known 40 years ago, in say 1975, for its Selectric typewriter. Ten years later by 1985, IBM set the standard for the personal computer, although not many typewriters were being sold any longer. In 1993, the company had a record \$8 billion **loss**. They had to adapt again. By 2005, IBM no longer made personal computers, having sold the division to China’s Lenovo. In 2013, IBM was worth slightly

more than Microsoft at \$126 billion. The destination changed over time, requiring them to adapt, and as difficult as it may have been, they benefited every time.

To reach the place where you want to go, it's more difficult when it is one's own personal life. It gets a lot more difficult when that life is constrained by residing in a prison. The course I've been struggling through with the inmates at MCI for the last 18 weeks is called Life Mapping. It's intended as a transitional program, for those inmates who are readying for release within the next 3 three years. Life Mapping moves them into a mode that looks forward to their release that is tangibly ahead.

However, my class that started out as 25 and is ending with about 15 has included 6 men with life sentences and others with long sentences who will be confined to prison for 15-20 more years. One of those serving a life sentence is roughly my age, nearly 60, and has been incarcerated about 40 years of his life for a crime committed when he was a top college football prospect. He took the Life Mapping course in 1996 when he was at another facility. It hasn't done much for him.

What do you do with Life Mapping for a man who is going to spend his life in prison, or who can't see daylight because his sentence has many years left to run? It becomes a question of whether you believe there is a Life Map for someone in this predicament. Does God have a plan for this person? Or is their existence something like Moses?

When we look at the reading from Deuteronomy, the final chapter in Moses' life, we may feel somewhat sorry for Moses. He has served the Lord faithfully, working with incredibly difficult circumstances, from contesting the great Pharaoh, to guiding the people through the Passover and the escape across the sea, to leading God's people amid their growing belligerency and intransigence for all of the years of their desert sojourn. They finally arrive within view of the Promised Land.

God takes Moses to the top of Mount Nebo and shows him the Promised Land. God recites his promise made to Abraham and affirms that the promise is for Moses' descendents as well. But Moses will only see it. It seems that God would not let him cross into it. There is a Numbers passage that tells how Moses is being punished for a failure of his own. But is that accurate? Had Moses fulfilled his mission, to liberate God's people from Egypt and to bring them to the Promised Land, but not for him to enter it? Is a new kind of leader needed to conquer and take the Promised Land, someone more like Joshua, a new generation, a new role for a new stage in the development of God's people in their Promised Land? It isn't the ending point for God's people, but it seems to be the ending point for Moses. In fact, Moses dies there on Mount Nebo.

The answer to these questions is challenging. God had in God's mind a starting point and an ending point for Moses. You could say the same thing about other figures, like Kings Saul and David, the prophets, Jesus, Paul, and many others. Does God have the same kind of plans for you and for me?

My concern is these guys in my class at the prison. Does God have plans for them in their incarceration? Is there a “there” for them to get to? Or are they like Moses, having come to the end of their journey, the prison is their Mount Nebo where they will simply die, proceeding no further?

I’ve struggled in teaching them because I can tell their own struggle with being in prison, a place that is belittling, manipulative, tense, often irrational, and living with constant scarcity. It is overall a truly bizarre situation in every way. They have great difficulties imagining a life that is confined in prison. They only seem capable of understanding a life that is lived outside of prison. Within prison, they don’t seem to recognize the possibility of anything meaningful happening. Life Mapping engages them as something that would begin outside of prison, not within it. It’s like life is suspended while they’re in prison, only resuming once they’re released. And for the lifers, they have the same attitude. However the chance of any release is not very good.

I’ve had to believe and witness to them that God has plans for them, that they are part of God’s plan and purpose, that God’s blessing of new life is waiting to be fulfilled in them. I don’t know how to break through the mindset that insists that God functionally stops at the barbed wire, that lives within it have been abandoned.

In the other reading from Acts, we hear about how plans go awry inexplicably. We hear how the apostle Paul can’t get there from here. His travel plans have been progressing nicely as he moves up through Asia Minor, what is modern day Turkey. They go through Phrygia and Galatia, but cannot enter the province of Asia. Trying to get to the area of Bithynia in that province was a failure; the text says “the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them.” No one knows exactly what this means besides how the plan for advancing the mission into the north and perhaps across the coast of the Black Sea has been stopped dead in its tracks, as if they ran into a roadblock like the rock slide on the bulletin cover.

They did not retreat, give up and go home, or believe that God had abandoned their mission. Rather we hear how Paul had a dream, a vision, of a Macedonian, a European, urging the apostle to “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Paul understood this as God’s clear call to detour from his plans and embark on a new direction that would take his ministry into Macedonia and Greece and eventually to Rome. Paul’s well-laid plans were disrupted completely, but he sought a new way to move forward. He found it ... with God’s help.

With that vision fresh in his mind, and with an urgency that would be typical of Paul, he resolutely set off in a new direction. (Note that in verse 10, the context shifts to “we,” the start of what we can believe are the notes of fellow traveler, not an editor – Luke – compiling an account that was not experienced.)

The point I hope we realize is that God’s mission for us in our later stages of life is not necessarily like Moses, ascending Mount Nebo to be told that the journey is over, the mission complete, the goal attained. Rather I would hope we would see ourselves like Paul, called by God to fulfill our promise of serving the Kingdom of our risen Lord.

In our aging, we may witness diminishment of all sorts, changes in our lives and our capabilities, even the ending of previous life missions. We still have a “there” to get to, and our attitude should not be that we can’t get there from here.

Like Paul, may we seek that new direction, that new vision, that new sense of promise calling us into new ways to serve and be the body of Christ in the world today, ministering to bring healing, hope and new life to others. I would hate to think that we find ourselves prisoners of our circumstances when we sit outside any prison, except one that we have designed to keep ourselves unencumbered and unmoved from whatever place we have settled into. Know that God still needs you, Christ still calls you, and the Spirit stands ready to empower you in that new endeavor that enable you to get there from here.