Sunday, July 17, 1977
HANDLING LIFE'S DETOURS
Acts 9:1-22

Most of us have had the experience of having to take a detour while traveling. Such detours are usually temporary. Eventually we get back to the main road and continue on our journey to our planned destination.

But there are other kinds of detours in life in which we are thrown off course and from then on continue in a different direction that we had planned or ever expected.

Actually, I suspect that most of us never reach the destination of our first choice but are detoured into a second or third choice which in the long run may turn out better than our first choice. The painter Whistler, for example, started out to be a soldier, but failed at West Point because he could not pass chemistry. "If silicon had been a gas," he used to say, "I should have been a Major General." Instead, he failed in his attempt to become a soldier, then tried engineering, and then went to painting — with remarkable results. His life turned out quite different than he had originally planned.

This happens to many of us. Our scripture lesson this morning tells that kind of story. Saul, who later was to be renamed Paul, was a zealous religious Jew. He was certain that the followers of the crucified Christ had to be silenced. Saul loved his religion and he hated to see anyone try to change it or threaten it. His dream was to be one of the great rabbis of Jerusalem. So it was that Saul obtained the authority of the High Priest to go to Damascus to arrest any Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem.

But on the road to Damascus, Saul came to a detour. His life was changed and from then on, he went in a different direction than expected or planned. No one could've predicted that Saul the persecutor would become Paul the first great Christian missionary.

Often when a great career has been finished and we marvel at the contribution that a person has made, we are tempted to forget that in many instances, like that of Paul, the person started out in a quite different direction.

One of the outstanding preachers in this country was Phillips Brooks. Of all the letters that Phillips Brooks received, it is said that he cherished most this one from a small tailor shop in Boston: "Dear Mr. Brooks: I am a tailor in a little shop near your church. Whenever I have the opportunity, I always go to hear you preach. Each time I hear you preach I seem to forget all about you, for you make me think of God."

But Phillips Brooks did not plan to be a preacher. He wanted to be a teacher. As soon as he graduated from college, he entered his chosen profession of teaching and failed. He failed completely. After he had failed and been fired from his position, he wrote: "I don't know what will become of me and I don't care much. I shall not study a profession. I wish I were fifteen years old again."

Phillips Brooks had his heart set on one destination and was detoured into another. But through it all he found the door into a service that if he had lived a hundred lives, he might never have found again.

The list of persons who started out in one direction and then were detoured into something else is endless. George Eastman started a career in banking, but later converted his hobby of photography into the Eastman Kodak Company. There is the stenographer whose skill at facial massage led her to open a beauty shop named for herself, Elizabeth Arden which blossomed into an empire of beauty.

There was the manager of a broom factory and later of a sanitarium, Will Kellogg, who made a fortune out of corn flakes. A Shakespearian actor (and not a good one), Isaac Singer, was detoured into making sewing machines.

Winston Churchill in school was a very slow student. As a public servant, his career was thought to have been finished in the 1930s and he had failed to achieve m.ost of his dreams and goals. It wasn't until he was 66 years old that the second World War called him into the position of British Prime Minister, and he rallied not only his own country's citizens, but all the Western World against Hitler.

Albert Einstein was not a brilliant child. Intellectually he seemed backward. He was late in learning to talk. In grade school he was such an unimpressive student that when his father asked the headmaster what profession young Albert should pursue, the headmaster replied: "It doesn't really matter because he will never make a success of anything. Some years later, Einstein failed his entrance examination to the Zurich Polytechnic. After a year of remedial work, he gained entrance to the school but upon graduation a few years later could not find a job.

Eventually he was employed as a patent examiner in the Swiss Federal Patent Office. In his spare time, he dabbled in physics and while still a patent examiner in 1905, he published five papers on entirely different subjects. Three of them were among the greatest in the history of physics. Now his life took on an entirely different direction; a direction that no one would've predicted.

Detours come into our lives in many forms. Two persons begin a marriage filled with dreams of a long and happy life together and then three or five or twelve years later the marriage has ended in divorce and life for each of the partners takes off in a different direction; a direction which neither of the partners would've earlier expected.

The death of a loved one causes detours in a person's life. Some come through the experience and continue on in a new direction; others give up all hope, and life becomes nothing but a burden to be endured.

A heart attack, a tumor, or some other illness often causes detours in people's lives. Plans have to be changed, adjustments made, and the persons involved are off in new direction.

What we're talking about this morning then, is not only the Apostle Paul's experience, but an experience common to all of us in one way or another. Is there anyone here who has not faced some detours in his or her life? Fifteen years ago, would you have guessed that you would be doing in your life what you are not doing, or living where you are now living? Recently someone asked Martin Marty if his life turned out the way he wanted it to. All he could say was that his life had been full of surprises and would continue to be so.

The surprises and detours in life once caused Peter Drucker to say: "Here I am, 58 years old, and I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up."

Those of us who are older watch the young grow up, as we did, with their ambitions and plans and dreams and we wonder what they will do when they face the inescapable experience of life as detours. Will they make the best of it? Will they have the spirit and attitude and technique to make of it their finest chance?

Since facing and handling life's detours is so universal a problem, what was it in Paul and others like him that enabled them to turn those detours into something magnificent?

1, In the first place, Paul and others like him, knew that detours in life often occur. God has not so made the world that our lives are without surprises. The creation is not like a fixed static machine which always runs in predictable ways.

There is an unpredictable even chaotic element present in the life we live and know. There are natural hazards over which we have a little or no control. Lightning strikes, and New York City or Lincoln has a blackout. Earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, drouth — we often like to call these "acts of God," but rather they are part of the freedom built into all creation.

Sometimes, when detours hit our lives, we cry out, "Why me?" But it would be just as true to ask, "Why not me?"

So, faith in divine Providence does not mean a divine planning by which everything is predetermined, as is an efficient machine. Rather God's Providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation, which cannot be destroyed by any event. Paul knew and we need to know that the demonic and destructive forces within ourselves and our world can never have an unbreakable grasp upon us. In this sense, all things work together for good, for the ultimate good, the eternal love and the Kingdom of God.

2.Secondly, like Paul, we are helped in handling life's detours when we realize that in this life, none of our plans, none of our dreams, nothing that we can accomplish, none of our successes or failures are immortal. Too often we clothe our plans and ideas and projects with immortality. If they are not accomplished, we're almost sure all is lost.

It's natural and good for us to have goals and dreams and plans, but if these are not realized on schedule, it does not mean that our life is over or wasted. Too often we give eternal value to the things we own, the people we know, the plans we have, and the successes we collect. All of these will pass away. They are not immortal!

Henri Nouwen, my spiritual counselor, puts it this way: "Aren't the many feelings of sadness, heaviness of heart and even dark despair, often intimately connected with the exaggerated seriousness with which we have clothed the people we know, the ideas to which we are exposed and the events we are a part of? This lack of distance, which excludes the humor in life, can create a suffocating depression which prevents us from lifting our heads above the horizon of our own limited existence."

3. In the third place we are helped in handling life's detours when we come to know like the Apostle Paul, that the God who is Creator of all never leads any person into any place where all the doors are shut.

The Bible is full of stories of persons like Paul whose faith in God enabled them to effectively handle life's detours.

Remember Joseph, betrayed by his brothers, dropped into a pit, sold to Midianite slave-dealers, made a servant in a household in Egypt, lied about by his master's wife and put in prison — his life with filled with detours. Where God was leading him, he could not possibly know. But he so kept his faith and handled his life that the doors opened into the biggest opportunity of his career. And one day years later when his frightened and penitent brothers stood before him, Joseph was able to say, "I am Joseph whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life... So, it was not you who sent me here but God."

Now this does not mean that in this life every story has a happy ending. There are detours which come to a bad end in this world. There are situations in which there is for the present, little or no hope. But in the long run what Paul knew and what we know is that nothing, nothing can ultimately separate us from the love of God and from his good purposes. Amen.