Sunday, March 9, 1986
LIFE'S DETOURS (No. 4 in a Series: On the Road with Jesus)
Matthew 4:18-22; Acts 16:7-10

Detours are a common occurrence on many journeys. Some detours are brief, and soon we are back on the main road. Other detours are extended, and we wonder if we'll ever get back on our planned route. Detours are almost always unexpected. The causes are many and varied. The road we had planned on taking has a section closed for repairs. A bridge is being replaced, or some other obstacle has blocked the highway.

The journey of life also has its detours where we find ourselves on a road we hadn't planned on taking at all. Sometimes the detour is not very long, and other times we never get back to what we had considered the main highway. The detour becomes the main road, and we find ourselves going in a direction we would never have expected in our wildest dreams.

The life journey of Jesus was interrupted by detours. Jesus probably wanted to begin his ministry earlier, but the death of Joseph caused a detour. When he began his public ministry, I'm certain that he did not see that the road would lead to the cross on Calvary. And the life journey of Jesus had other detours as well. Frequently, he would have something planned only to be detoured by someone wanting to be healed.

Not only did Jesus' own life have its detours, but meeting him caused detours in many other people's lives, and it still does today. In the scripture reading this morning from the Gospel of Matthew, we heard the story of Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee, and there he met Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. I'm sure that these two brothers in their wildest imaginations never dreamed that they would one day be leaders in a new religious movement that changed the world. They probably thought they would be fishermen the rest of their lives. The same was true of all the other people who became his followers. Their lives took a road they had not previously planned.

Take the Apostle Paul as another example. 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 he 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 have predicted that Saul, the persecutor, would become Paul, the missionary.

And even after that, he experienced new detours in his journeys. In the scripture reading this morning from the book of Acts, one of the major detours is mentioned. Listen to part of it again: "And when they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us,' and when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."

This brief account of a detour had major implications. In fact, we are dealing here with one of the most significant events in human history. Here Christianity passed over from Asia into Europe. But Paul had not planned to go to Europe. This was a detour. Paul had planned to go

to Bithynia. And no wonder, for Bithynia was one of the richest provinces of Asia Minor, but he went to Europe instead.

I'm sure that at first Paul didn't like this detour. I can almost hear him saying, "I wanted to go to Bithynia and here I am in Troas!" Yet through Troas, a way opened to a whole new area for the Christian faith.

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, the person started out in a quite different direction and only because of an unplanned detour was that person able to make the contribution.

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. A 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 a manager of a broom factory and later of a sanitarium, Will Kellogg, who made a fortune out of corn flakes. A Shakespearean 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 most 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.

As a child, Albert Einstein was not thought to be brilliant. He was late in learning to talk. 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 he could not find a job, although he applied for teaching positions at a number of schools. Finally, he was employed as a patent examiner in the Swiss Federal Patent Office. In his spare time, he worked 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 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 or twenty or more years later,

the marriage has ended in divorce and life for each of the partners takes off in a different direction.

An athlete is injured in some permanent way and is forced to pursue a different career. The long-term illness or death of a loved one causes detours in many of our lives. We end up on a different road than we would have ever expected. Perhaps we've all read too many stories that ended—"And they lived happily ever after," as if one's life journey had no stopping places or detours. "And they lived happily ever after," says Joshua Liebman, "is one of the most tragic sentences in literature. It is tragic because it tells a falsehood about life and has led countless generations of people to expect something from human existence which is not possible on this fragile, failing, imperfect earth."

Life is not a smooth journey from beginning to end. It is filled with detours and stops and starts, and ups and downs of all kinds. Is there anyone here listening to this sermon 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 now doing? Someone asked church historian 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.

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's detours. Will they make the best of it? Will they have the spirit and attitude and religious faith to make of it their finest chance?

What does the life of Jesus and our Christian faith have to say to us about life's detours?

Jesus and Paul and others like them knew that detours in life often occur. God has not made the world so that our lives are without surprises. The creation is not like a fixed static machine that always runs in predictable ways. There is an unpredictable, even chaotic, element present in the life we live and know.
Thus faith in divine providence does not mean a divine plan by which everything is predetermined. Rather God's providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation which cannot be destroyed by any event. Jesus 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 the long run, all things work together for good, for the ultimate good — the eternal love of God. So detours will occur. With God's help, we can turn them into something good.

Secondly, like Jesus, 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. We come to believe that if our life's journeys do not go according to our specific itinerary, all is lost, or we have failed.
Rather the fact is that life is an uninterrupted succession of leave-takings and goodbyes. The journey is filled with detours. It's good for us to have dreams and goals and destinations in mind, but if these are not realized on schedule, it does not mean that our journey 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 or failures we collect. All of these things will pass away. They are not immortal.

Henri Nouwen wrote, “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 horizons of our own limited existence.”

Thirdly, we are helped in dealing with life’s detours when we remember that our Christian faith teaches that God, who is creator of all, never leads any person into any place where all the doors are shut. The Bible is filled with stories of people like Paul whose faith in God enabled them to effectively handle life’s detours.
Remember Joseph in the Old Testament, betrayed by his brothers, dropped into a pit, sold to Midianite slave-dealers, made a servant in the household in Egypt, lied about by his master’s wife and put in prison — his life was filled with detours. Where all these detours were leading him, he could not possibly know, but he kept his faith and handled his life in the present so 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 there; for God sent me before you to preserve life... So it was not you who sent me here, but God.”

Haven’t you had the experience on a journey when because of a detour you were able to experience some scenery and unique places that you would not have been part of had you been able to stay on the main road according to your original plan? Detours frequently offer new opportunities undreamed of.

So too with your life’s journey. When we follow Jesus, detours will occur, and we will be led into journeys and places we had not imagined. But then our life can have a purpose and a joy that’s not possible otherwise. Amen.