Sunday, July 11, 1993
DEALING WITH LIFE'S DETOURS
Acts 9:1-22

Most of us have had the experience of taking a detour while traveling. You've planned your trip carefully, with a specific destination and an estimated time of arrival. Then, without warning, a sign looms on the horizon: "Detour Ahead."

Detours on a trip are usually temporary. Eventually, you get back to the main road and continue on your journey toward your planned destination. Although they can throw you off schedule, sometimes detours can be fascinating and filled with surprises — especially if you're not in a hurry.

Life itself has its own kind of detours, its alternate routes. You may have planned your life to go in one direction with a certain destination in mind, and then, without warning, some event or surprise throws you off course. From then on, you find yourself going in a different direction than you had ever planned or expected. Unlike detours on a trip, which are usually temporary, some of life's detours are permanent. The alternate route eventually becomes the main road, and you arrive at a destination you never expected.

Actually, I suspect that in our life's journeys, 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 turns out better than our first choice. The artist 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." He failed in his attempt to become a soldier, then tried engineering, and next went to painting — with remarkable results. His life turned out quite differently from what he had originally planned.

The Bible is filled with stories of people who had to deal with life's detours. Saul, who later was renamed Paul, was zealous in following his religion. He was certain that the followers of the risen Christ had to be silenced. Saul loved his religion and hated to see anyone try to change or threaten it. His dream was to be one of the great Rabbis of Jerusalem. So, he obtained the authority of the High Priest to go to Damascus to arrest any Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial.

But on the road to Damascus, Saul encountered a detour. His life was changed, and from then on, he went in a different direction, one that in his wildest dreams he would never have imagined. No one could've predicted that Saul the persecutor would become Paul the first great Christian missionary.

And that was only one of many detours in his life. As he carried out his missionary work, he often found himself detoured into places he had not planned on going. For example, in one incident reported in the Book of Acts, Paul and his companions had made plans to go to Bithynia, one of the richest provinces in Asia Minor. But one night, he had a dream in which a man of Macedonia appeared and said, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." So they took that detour, which had major implications, for here Christianity passed over from Asia into Europe. But Paul had not planned to go to Europe.

Often, when a great career has come to an end 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 different direction. That's why I enjoy reading autobiographies and biographies so much. They are filled with stories of how individuals have handled life's detours.

One of the outstanding preachers in this country was Phillips Brooks. Of all the letters that Brooks received, it is said that he cherished most a letter 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.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, did not plan on becoming the mother of the Messiah. Furthermore, once Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph had to take a detour into Egypt before they could return to Nazareth. Moses did not plan on leading the Israelites out of Egypt. His detour began when, as a shepherd, he encountered the call of God in a burning bush. His life was filled with one detour after another.

Rosa Parks did not plan on being the instrument that sparked the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, which then turned into the non-violent civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. And he never planned on being the leader of that movement. He had planned on remaining a parish minister. For both of them, these were surprising detours that not only changed their lives but the lives of countless others as well.

The life journey of Jesus was interrupted by detours. He wanted to begin his ministry earlier, but the untimely death of Joseph, his earthly father, caused a detour. When he began his public ministry, I'm certain he did not see that the road would lead to the cross on Calvary.

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. When Jesus met Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, I'm sure these two brothers, in their wildest imaginations, never dreamed that they would one day be leaders in a new religious movement that would change the world. They probably thought they would be fishermen for the rest of their lives.

The list of persons who started out in one direction and then were detoured into another is endless. 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 the entire Western world as well.

Detours come into our lives in many forms. Two people begin a marriage filled with dreams of a long and happy life together, and then, three, five, twelve, or twenty years later, the marriage ends in divorce, and life for each of the partners takes off in a different direction. Or here's

another marriage where one of the partners dies while still in the middle of life, and an unplanned detour is underway.

An athlete, in the middle of her career, is injured in some permanent way and is forced to pursue a different course. Today, our theological seminaries are filled with women and men who are readying themselves for a second or third career — a detour that very few of them, if any, would've expected years earlier.

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 had planned. We've all read too many stories where the concluding line was: "And they lived happily ever after," implying that one's life journey had no stopping places or detours.

"'And they lived happily ever after' is one of the most tragic sentences in literature," says Joshua Liebman. "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 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 what you are now doing?

Those of us who are older watch the young grow up as we did — with their ambitions, 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? When life hands them a lemon, will they make lemonade? Some of life's greatest opportunities and adventures have come through the unexpected detours in life.

In summary, here are some of the things our Christian faith tells us about dealing with life's detours:

First, our Christian faith tells us that God has not made the world so that our lives are without surprises. God has not promised that our lives will be a smooth journey without interruptions or detours from beginning to end.
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. In the long run, all things work together for good, for the ultimate good, because of God's eternal love for all of creation.

Detours in life will occur, and with God's help, we can often turn them into something good.

Second, we are helped in dealing with life's detours when we remember that in this life, none of our plans, none of our dreams, nothing that we can accomplish, and none of our successes or failures are immortal. Too often, we clothe our plans, ideas, and projects with immortality. Thus, we come to believe that if our life's journey does not go exactly according to our planned itinerary, all is lost or we have failed. Such is not the case at all. The fact is that life is filled with detours, endings, and new beginnings.
It's good for us to have dreams, 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 tend to 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.

Third, we are helped in dealing with life's detours when we remember that our Christian faith teaches that God, who is the Creator of all, never leaves any person in 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 deal with life's detours.
Remember Joseph in the Old Testament, betrayed by his brothers, dropped into a pit, sold to Midianite slave dealers, made into a household servant 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 door opened into the biggest opportunity of his life. 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."

Haven't you had the experience on a trip where, because of a detour, you were able to experience some scenery and unique places that you would've missed completely had you been able to stay on the main road according to your original plan? But if all you did was complain about the detour, you would never even see some of the possibilities it offered. Detours frequently offer new opportunities undreamed of.

So, too, it can be with your life's journey. Detours will occur, but if we trust God, we will be led into journeys and places we had not imagined, and our lives can have a purpose and joy that would not be possible otherwise. Amen.