**Guided by the Markers**

**Text: Exodus 13:21-22**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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As you know, Pastor Helen and I trekked in Ireland for two weeks this past summer. The second week we hiked on the Wicklow Way, which winds through the Wicklow Mountains south of Dublin. The trail was marked by a picture of a hiker on a wooden post, and I believe that we have a slide of one of those markers. We called him Wicklow Willie.

Now Willie was a little shy. He didn’t always show-up when we expected him to. On the first day of the trek, we were hiking up a steep hill. I was in the lead. As you’ll recall, Helen and I have two different ways of tackling a hill. I push myself real hard so I can get to the top and end the torture as soon as possible. She takes short, sensible steps so that she won’t die! So I’m taking my long strides up this hill, and I’m determined to get to the top without stopping, and I’m way out in front of Helen, with a laser-like focus on the top of the hill. “I’m going to do this!” All of a sudden I hear Helen scream. And I think, “Oh my God, what’s happened to Helen?! So I turn around, and here’s Helen about a quarter mile down the hill, and she shouts, “You missed the marker.” She’s standing next to Wicklow Willie, and he’s pointing to the right. I’d blown right past him. Now, in my defense, Willie was hiding behind some bushes, and he was on the left side of the trail. I mean, if the trail is turning off to the right, you ought to put the marker on the right side, correct? But, as I made my case, Helen said, “Well, I saw him!”

You have to watch for the markers.

I missed a marker and got off track. The Church frequently does so as well; always has. And not just the Church, but humanity in general. It’s so easy to get caught-up in doing your own thing. Like your Pastor climbing-up that hill, it’s easy to be so focused on *my* goals, *my* agenda, *my* accomplishments that we miss the markers that tell us where *God* wants us to go. Without the markers, we humans get lost. Even *with* the markers, we tend to get lost.

Which is why God placed some mighty impressive markers to guide the Israelites on their trek through the wilderness: a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. That’s the way that the Book of Exodus tells the story. And it’s quite a story.

A lot has happened since last week, when we met Moses at the Burning Bush. He’s answered his call and gone to Pharaoh and said, “Let my people go.” At first, of course, Pharaoh says no because what tyrant ever voluntarily granted justice to an oppressed people simply because someone asked him to do so? He has to be pressured into doing it. But after some serious lobbying on God’s part, Pharaoh relents and the slaves are released and now they are making their way across the desert; a trackless desert, where – without markers – they would quickly be lost. Hence the pillars of cloud and fire. With these markers God led them along the way and gave them light, that they might travel by day and by night. Without the markers, we humans get lost. We have to watch for the markers.

And the markers say “Love.” And the markers say, “Justice.” And the markers say, “Compassion.” And the markers say, “Community.” That’s what it says on the markers that God has placed in the Bible, the markers that one can find all along the journey of history, the markers that we can see in our own experience; if we take the time to look for them. We can ignore them, to be sure. We can blow right past them if we choose to focus on our own agenda. But we run the risk of being lost somewhere in the wilderness if we do. We have to watch for the markers.

We have to watch for those markers, and we have to work together. You see, we don’t watch for the markers on our own. At least, if we’re being the Church together, we don’t watch for them on our own. I missed Wicklow Willie that one time (actually, several times), but Helen was watching out: not only for the markers, but also for me. In the Church we watch out for God’s markers and we watch out for each other, and thus we work together. In the Church, we try to be accountable both to each other and to God. If one member strays significantly, it’s up to the community to gently bring him or her back to the fold. If the community strays significantly, then it needs to listen to that prophetic voice that screams, “Hey; you all are going the wrong way!” We have to watch for the markers: not just as individuals, but as a community of faith.

And we do so according to our particular gifts. It’s like another moment when Helen and I both missed a marker and lost our way. As I said, Wicklow Willie was a little shy. He didn’t always turn-up at major intersections. So this one morning Helen and I realized that we hadn’t seen Willie for a while and we’d lost the trail. But, Willie wasn’t the only marker that we had to go by. Helen had a compass app on her cellphone, and unlike me she actually knew how to access it. I’d studied the maps pretty carefully, so I knew the major landmarks and had a general sense of the direction that we needed to go. So Helen whipped out her phone and I pulled out the map. She accessed the app and I surveyed the lay of the land. We knew that we had to go generally north, and we spotted a small mountain to the northeast that the trail skirted. Armed with that knowledge, we headed in the general direction that we knew we had to go, and before long we spotted Willie again and we were back on the trail.

Helen and I needed each other. We had to figure things out as a community. Even if I’d known how to access the compass app I couldn’t have read it that day because I was having one of my bad eye days. And Helen will be the first to tell you that map reading is not her forte. But together, as a community, we got the job done.

That’s the way it is in the Church. None of us can do everything. All of us are gifted in some areas and weak in others. As you know if you’ve chaired a Ministry or a Task Force, I’m a big advocate of delegating. Because not even the most gifted chairperson has the combination of time, talent and energy to do everything that needs to be done. As a community, we have to watch for the markers and read the maps and pack the knapsacks and attend to the esprit de corps along the way. No one can do that alone; no one *ought* to do that alone. But together, we can do it all. Moving the Church down the trail toward the Kingdom of God is a community enterprise.

So, we have to *watch* for the markers that God has placed along the way, we have to *work* together as a community as we go, and sometimes we have to *shout out* to each other when someone has lost their way. Like Helen had to scream at me, sometimes we have to shout at each other.

Again, we have to remember the extent to which the markers in the Bible have to do with justice and compassion. God freed the Hebrew slaves because God is a God of justice. God freed the Hebrew slaves because God had compassion upon them. And if sometimes poor people and Black people and immigrant people and people who’ve watched their loved ones die from drug overdoses seem to be shouting at us – shouting in anger – we need to remember the pain that they’ve experienced, the injustice that they’ve experienced; sometimes for multiple generations. And we need to remember as well that when the Hebrews slaves shouted out of their pain, God heard them and God moved in a powerful way to free them.

Sometimes we have to shout at each other when someone has lost their way. Or when an entire nation has lost its way. In 1963 Attorney General Robert Kennedy invited a group of African-American intellectuals and artists to his father’s fancy penthouse apartment in Manhattan. His goal was to listen to their concerns, but also to remind them of all of the things that his brother’s administration was doing for their people. So amidst the abundance of the best food that Kennedy money could buy, the Attorney General listened. And he got an earful. At first he couldn’t understand why these angry men and women were so ungrateful. I mean, his brother’s campaign had bailed Dr. King out of jail in 1960, the Administration had intervened on behalf of the Freedom Riders in 1961, and the President was preparing to introduce the most comprehensive Civil Rights bill in American history. But Robert Kennedy listened to their shouts of anger, listened to their painful sobs, listened to their descriptions of the incredible burdens that are borne by every Black person in America; then and now. He listened, and he learned, and he came to a much deeper understanding of the shouts of anger, the pleas for justice, the need to advocate for a people who had been brought to America long before Kennedy’s own Irish immigrant forbearers, but who still languished in crime-infested ghettos because of the doorways to education and employment and housing that had never been opened to them; indeed, the doors to opportunity that had been slammed in their faces.

Dr. King said that justice delayed is justice denied, but the concept goes back through the Magna Carta to the rabbis of Jesus’ time. Justice delayed is justice denied, and the victims of such injustice have to shout to be heard. And in so doing, they call our attention to the marker of justice on the trail to God’s Kingdom.

Of course, there are dangers associated with shouting. I remember one particularly painful moment in my family back in 1968 when my dad and brother on one side and my granddad on the other got into a horrible argument about the Vietnam War. There was plenty of shouting, but no listening.

I’ve been thinking a lot about my Republican Granddad lately, because I think even he might be shouting in anger and frustration at our President right now. If Granddad believed anything, he believed that one must be honest, one must be fair, one must adhere to the principles of the Bible, and one must obey the law. That’s the way that he ran his business and raised his sons. Granddad was a man of few words, but when someone failed these tests – when someone blew past these markers – he didn’t hesitate to speak out, and to raise his voice if he had to – in order for his protest to be heard. So if Granddad was alive today, I believe that even he would be speaking out against the dishonesty, the disregard for the law, and the disrespect for biblical principles that we are seeing not only in the White House but on Capitol Hill as well. When someone blows past the biblical markers, sometimes you have to shout to get their attention. And when this nation, under God, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal; when this nation allows some on the broad plane of equality to rise above the law and others to be held down by centuries of oppression, then the Church must shout out with the prophet Amos, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream!” (See Amos 5:24.)

You know what? We’ve heard some of those shouts. As a congregation, we’ve heard those shouts and we’re once again seeing the markers, and we’re bringing some who’ve lost their way back to the trail. When we provide school supplies and warm coats to struggling families, we’re once again seeing the markers. When we provide winter shelter to freezing men, we’re once again seeing the markers. When we extend God’s gift of music to the children of this community, we’re once again seeing the markers. When we make it possible for youth from poor families to come to Camp, we’re once again seeing the markers; and we’re bringing God’s children along the trail: *before* they lose their way, so they don’t have to shout out in anger and in pain. As a congregation, we are doing all of these things and more. This is our mission. This is how we’re watching the markers. This is how we are once again finding our way as we navigate through the wilderness of this world.

Never underestimate how much good you’re doing when you provide one homeless man with shelter, or one family with warm coats, or one child with a week at Camp. Never underestimate how much good you’re doing when you invite one child into a choir or one parent to come to church and listen to his child sing. Because the release of the captives sometimes occurs one captive at a time, and one small step at a time. It took many small steps to get from Egypt to the Promise Land. But you have to start somewhere. Amen.