

Stay On the Same Road

Sardis Baptist Church

Rev. Debbie Kidd

October 8th, 2023

Numbers 33:1-2

Giving or receiving directions in Charlotte, and I am sure for other cities as well — can be quite an experience, confusing ... and a little frustrating.

For instance, try telling someone how to get to and from anywhere in the Queens Road area. Or how about all the Sharon Roads. I lived in Atlanta briefly and I had difficulty navigating all of the Peachtree streets.

But my real personal experience was years ago when I was serving a church in the Mint Hill area. I asked someone how to get from that church to the Baptist Book Store on South Blvd. So, they began their lengthy directions. Keep in mind, this was in 1990, no GPS. Well, yes, there were maps. But I just wanted someone to tell me — how to get from where I was to where I needed to be.

I knew I was in trouble, however, when they kept repeating the same phrase, which is also the title of this sermon — Now, stay on the same road.

Their directions went something like this ... “get on Idlewild, cross Independence Blvd, but stay on the same road ... then cross over Monroe Road and you will see that the road changes names from Idlewild to Rama, but stay on the same road. Then there will be another intersection and the name of the road changes again to Sardis, and still - stay on the same road ... keep going ... the road changes from Sardis to Fairview, but stay on the same road ... then you will cross over Park Road where Fairview changes to Tyvola.

Then I was home free, at the second traffic light, turn left onto South Blvd and the Baptist Book Store would be a little ways down there on my right.

At the end of all of her directions, I said, “So, I never turn off this road, it just changes names 5 or 6 times, right?” I thought to myself, well, that should be easy.

From Idlewild to South Blvd, no turns, just stay on the same road. Sounded simple ... so ... I did not bother to write down anything about the directions. Why would I? I’m just staying on the same road ... what does it matter if the name of the road changes. I should be fine, right?

Remember there were no GPS ... and I’m driving, so I can’t look at a map. I well remember that day. Starting out, feeling confident — I got this. I began the journey, driving on Idlewild, looking up and seeing a different name, asking myself - I forget, am I supposed to be on Rama yet? Looking up and seeing another name change - uh-oh is it Sardis to Fairview or Fairview to Sardis.

Even though there was one important detail to remember - stay on the same road — I began to doubt myself. I began to wonder if I was doing the right thing. I became a bit anxious on this journey. Remember there were no cell phones either. What I thought would be simple, turned into some doubt, a little panic, and quite a few anxious moments.

Then one day it hit me ... call it a revelation, an epiphany ... whatever it was ... it hit me. (That experience was a lot like life). I am kind of on a road like this ... and you know what ... so are you. This road is life. It may change names from time to time, but it is still life.

In this life ... if I want to get from ‘here’ to — ‘there’ — I must stay on the same road. If you want to get from ‘here’ to ‘there’ you must stay on the same road. No matter how many times the road changes names and no matter what those names are. And, yes, even if there is some doubt ... a little panic ...and quite a few anxious moments along the way ... you and I must stay on the same road.

And isn’t this what we try to teach the children in our lives. Sometimes we’re on the winning team and sometimes we’re on the losing team ... but it is the same game, and we keep playing.

Sometimes life is fair ... and sometimes, as Kathryn reminded us a couple of weeks ago, life is not fair ... but it is still life.

It is a lesson we try to teach our children. And I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel like I need a remedial course.

Maybe we should pay better attention to the names of this road called life ... what it is changing from ... or what it is changing to. Perhaps we should learn from my mistake and take a few notes about life — write down a few of the road names so we might recognize them when we see them. Or maybe even help someone else with their travels on their journey.

Or ... perhaps we should learn from the people in the Old Testament and their travels on a road to a 'promised land'.

This takes us to our Scripture reading for the day - listen again to the passage in Numbers 33. These are the stages by which the Israelites went out of the land of Egypt in military formation under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Moses wrote down their starting points, stage by stage, by command of the Lord; and these are their stages according to their starting places. The rest of the verses in this chapter, continues with the details of the names of the places on their journey Ramses, Succoth, Elim, Rephidim, etc.

And so I ask us this morning, what do we know about these Israelites and this journey? Smooth sailing from start to finish, right? This journey began with God seeing the misery of the people and a promise to deliver them from where they were — from the Egyptians — and bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey.

These people, went through stages, they were on a road that changed names, a road that brought them some doubt, a little panic, and quite a few anxious moments. There are books about this journey and the road — in the Old Testament.

There was that time early in their journey that the Israelites looked back and saw the Egyptians advancing on them — and the Bible says in great fear they cried out to the Lord. This road has already changed names and here comes the panic.

That fear was resolved, and they journeyed on to Shur, another road change and discovering there was no water — well there was water — but it was too bitter to drink. So, they started to

complain about where they were and what was happening to them. The road for the people of Israel had changed names again and they began to doubt.

They even began to say 'it would have been better if we had died in Egypt or died in the wilderness'. In other words, why did I even get on this road? Maybe I should have just turned around at the first sign of trouble.

Staying on the same road was not easy for the people of Israel — and — sometimes it is not easy for us, either, is it?

I have been there ... you have been there. Traveling this road of life and not being happy when the road changes names.

Feeling good about where we are in a career ... and the name of the road changes and we are panicking because we are out of a job.

Celebrating our relationships ... and the name of the road changes and we are in the middle of a divorce or someone we love dies and the grief is overwhelming.

Our health has been on a good track and at the next doctor visit — the news isn't good — the name of the road changes and we find ourselves doubting the presence of God.

Our church is doing okay, navigating the changes since COVID, getting ourselves in a process of discerning where we go from here ... and the name of the road changes and our pastor resigns — to follow his own road ... and we are left with even more questions.

Yes, remember, do it here's the church, here's the steeple, open the door and there's the people. Sardis Baptist is made up of people staying on the same road, no matter how many times that road changes names. And wouldn't it make sense that the community of Sardis Church is moving on a road too — no matter how many times that road changes names?

So, where's the good news preacher? It is the same good news that the people of Israel experienced — and then they would forget — and then they would experience it again.

Listen to Exodus 13:22 — Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. The presence of God never left them — and the presence of God never leaves us. — We doubt, we panic, and we get anxious, but no matter where we are on our road, no matter if we lose our direction. God told Abram, God told Moses, God sent Jesus and the Holy Spirit — and God is telling us — I Am With You.

But sometimes we experience the presence of God and then sometimes we forget and doubt that it is there. Hey but at least we are not as bad as these 2 little boys:

A couple had two mischievous little boys. At their wits' end, the parents contacted a clergyman who had been successful in rehabilitating bad children in the past.

The clergyman asked to see the boys individually. The eight-year-old was sent in first. The clergyman sat the boy down and asked him a little sternly, "Where is God?"

The boy made no response, so the clergyman repeated the question in an even sterner tone, "Where is God?"

At that, the boy bolted from the room, ran directly home, and slammed himself in his closet. His older brother followed him into the closet and asked what happened.

The younger brother replied, "We are in big trouble this time. God is missing, and they think we did it!"

Friends — God is not missing.

And you know, God tells us something else about this road — there is not an easy street. Remember those words through the prophet Isaiah 43:2 - When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you.

This road continued into the New Testament. Jesus spent some time journeying on a road that changed names, didn't he? Celebrating miracles, baptisms, bringing people to the abundant life he came to give ... and then the road changes names and Jesus is questioned, betrayed, and people he thought he could count on denied even knowing him.

And we hear words of Jesus from John 16:33 These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation or trouble; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

So you see, this road for the people of Israel — this road for Jesus — this road for Sardis — and for you and me — it changes names a lot — there isn't an easy street, and most importantly God is not missing.

And if we want to get from where we are now — to where we want to be. We don't need to give up — turn around — or panic. And we might just need to listen when someone tries to tell us that even though the road is going to change names from time to time — Stay on the same road.