

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
First Sunday of Advent – November 29, 2015 – Pilgrimage to the Manger
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

REFLECTION

“The idea is to try to give all the information to help others to judge the value of your contribution; not just the information that leads to judgment in one particular direction or another.”

~ Richard P. Feynman, American Physicist (1918-1988)

“Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction.”

~ John F. Kennedy, 35th President of USA (1917-1963)

Asking Directions

“11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.”

Imagine stopping at a gas-station to ask for directions – and finding Jesus standing behind the counter ready to give you the lay of the land, the way to go and the landmarks to look for. That would certainly make holiday traveling a lot easier – especially if he could include ways to navigate the family conversation around the table and cross the emotional field of landmines often surrounding the Christmas tree. It is possible that prayer and much therapy will give you such a map – but it takes time and a lot of work to put the route together.

There are people who actually do make a career out of knowing the answers to any possible question asked by a traveler in their city.

“The Knowledge,” has been called the most difficult mental undertaking and test in the world: requiring students (people seeking to be official London taxi drivers) to memorize the city’s 25,000 streets and every business and landmark on them. During the required examinations, they must devise and describe accurate, efficient routes from an almost infinite number of Point A’s to Point B’s.

“The Knowledge” – The Ultimate Test of London’s Detailed Geography

Posted by Jan Carpman on Nov 12, 2014

<http://www.directionalsense.com/category/asking-directions/>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/10/t-magazine/london-taxi-test-knowledge.html>

One tourist was looking for the location of a statue – only a foot tall – of 2 mice sharing a piece of cheese. The taxi driver knew it was on the facade of a building on Philpot Lane, corner of Eastcheap, not far from London Bridge.

It takes about four years to memorize the routes and landmarks – much of the studying done from a motorbike – running routes around traffic patterns at different times of the day – and updating one’s knowledge whenever a business or restaurant opens or changes names or moves – remembering nicknames for neighborhoods – and anticipating what may be interesting to a variety of unique individuals who visit London and take taxis. The test is grueling, the achievement equated to the rigors of achieving a degree in law or medicine.

Knowing where you are and where to go is an art – and a phenomenal challenge in life – not just in London. It involves study and an ability to pay attention – a serious obstacle if you have A.D.D. It means learning how to interact with others, read their body language, interpret and visualize what they are saying with their words. An article in Oxford American Magazine tells this story about the ways in which we modern humans might be losing our ability to do exactly this.

I watched a young woman, alone, photograph herself in front of the “Spoonbridge and Cherry” sculpture using a selfie stick. A year ago she would have been compelled to ask a stranger to take that shot. She might have enjoyed a conversation. And she would have necessarily ceded a tiny measure of artistic control, allowing the stranger’s framing and eye to affect the tenor of the photograph.

What I’ve realized, looking back on the selfie-taker, is that the story’s particular grief isn’t the erosion of human interaction. It’s what’s beneath it, the flaw beneath the flaw. When you ask a stranger for directions you experience a moment of humility; for an instant, you are placing yourself, in a small, nearly intangible way, into another’s hands. There is an admission of need, an acceptance of the state of not-knowing, followed by an intensity of listening and looking for the details.

What [I] grieve is the decay not of human connection, but of an entire imaginative act—one that is closely akin to storytelling and listening, to the tacit exchange between writer and reader.

Say I need to get to an unfamiliar house in an unfamiliar city for a wedding shower, circa 1992. I call to ask the hostess for directions. She tells me to exit

the freeway on Hanley Road, turn left, go through two stoplights. After the second light, I'll pass a Shell station on the left just before my turn onto Blackberry Lane. If I start to go up a hill and see a fire station, I've gone too far. Go two blocks on Blackberry, take the third right onto Adams. Fourth house on the left, blue Cape Cod with shuttered dormers. Tire swing in the tree, scarecrow and pumpkins beside the mailbox.

As she speaks, pictures form in my head. I reach into my past (creating some kind of amalgam from recollected scarecrows and Cape Cods and fire stations) and project into my future, imagining the drive I'm about to take. Further, I make assumptions based on the details she's chosen to share: she has children; the interior of her home will likely contain seasonal I. I wonder if she keeps a garden. What I'm experiencing is, in essence, a holistic act of empathic imagination.

The author then muses:

But why is looking important? It's almost a platitude: We need art because it teaches us to notice. But why do we need to notice? Why not let Siri simply talk us there—allow everything to wash over us and disappear into the ether?

...We need to be intentional lookers in order to preserve, within ourselves, the real human kindness that is the external manifestation of a sympathetic imagination.

ASKING FOR DIRECTIONS

By Jamie Quatro | May 27, 2015

<http://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/592-asking-for-directions>

We need to be able to visualize what another person is telling us – not just about the route and landmarks – but about their lives and relationships. Story-telling and visual art and the art of asking for directions can help us to gain and maintain this essential skill for living a compassionate life, for living as a connected web of concern and support.

And....asking directions is an essential component of living with hope. If we have no hope of “getting there” – wherever “there” is – then why ask directions at all? We need to hope – even EXPECT – to get there – in order to be willing to put in the time and do the work it takes to find our way. Like the London Cabbies, our life's work is to pay attention, look and learn, travel every road and route, memorize landmarks, and become sources of hope and wisdom for those who are new to life's twists and turns.

Giving up is not an option. Surviving – even when we are lost or bereft or we’ve been robbed – surviving is the act of hope that encourages others to keep going when things are hard.

And if you think about it – think about all the people who have given you excellent directions – helped when you were lost – encouraged you when you were tired and ready to turn around – if you think about it – Jesus was right there – behind the counter, on the sidewalk, at the next table, alongside the road, next to you in the front seat of the car – Jesus was looking at you with compassion – behind the eyes of that angel who got you where you were going.

Now may our G-d ... and our Guide Jesus direct our Way...
Amen

Scripture Reading for Sunday November 29, 2015 – Advent 1 – Year C

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. **11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.** 12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13 And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

CHILDREN: “Did the Magi ask Directions?”

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT * HOPE

Walkers With The Dawn By Langston Hughes

Being walkers with the dawn and morning,
Walkers with the sun and morning,
We are not afraid of night,
Nor days of gloom,
Nor darkness--
Being walkers with the sun and morning.

We are on this Pilgrimage to the Manger.
We walk together - and we walk with Hope.
We light the candle of Hope as we travel through this season of Advent.

Light one purple candle.

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poems/hope/page-1/32554/>

November 26, 2015

To Walk with God and One Another

Talitha Arnold

"If only your children will take heed to walk before me as you have walked before me."
- I Kings 8:22-30

Whenever new members joined the Connecticut church I served in the 1980's (First Church United Church of Christ in Middletown, CT), we used the congregation's original covenant. Written in 1658, the statement began, "We doe in ye presence of God, the Holy Angells and this Assembly take, acknowledge, and Avouch the one and onely true God." Reciting it, I always felt like we'd stepped back into a Shakespearean play. It was quite a rite of passage for new members (and the ongoing ones, too) to stumble through the archaic language.

Yet the core of the covenant rang true, even 300-plus years later. "Ingageing that we will walk with this God," we promised, "and one with another according to the rules of ye Gospell."

The commitment to "walk with God and one another" wasn't original. Variations of the promise are found throughout the covenants of those early Congregational churches, beginning with the 1629 Salem Church Covenant.

Today's scripture text reminds us that the promise is also deeply rooted in our biblical faith. As he dedicates the Temple, King Solomon tells the people to "take heed to walk before God" as their ancestors did. The king knew it was the only way to life.

Whether from 3,000 years ago or a mere 300, the covenant to walk with God and one another affirms that faith is a journey, best taken with others. As we gather tomorrow to give thanks, may that journey be at the top of our list of blessings.

Prayer

Thank you, God, for walking with us every step of the way.

Guide our feet in your paths of peace and hope. Amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Talitha Arnold is Senior Minister of the United Church of Santa Fe (UCC), Santa Fe, New Mexico. She is the author of [Worship for Vital Congregations](#), published by The Pilgrim Press.