



SUNNYVALE

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From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ *Leaving God's Mark*
The Rev. Matt Gough ~ May 29, 2011

Joshua 4:20-24
Ephesians 1:3-14

It was a Monday evening. I ate dinner and helped get the boys to bed, and still had 15 minutes to make it to a monthly meeting at a home that I had been to already a couple of times. Now unlike another pastor we know, I have always believed that I have a very good sense of direction. My motto had been, "If I've been there once, I can get there again." And generally, that's held true.

Except for that night.

I don't know what happened. But I left the house confident that I knew exactly where I was going. Somehow my memory of landmarks that I navigate by, had gotten corrupted. And as I drove around unfamiliar blocks trying to get on track, I soon had no idea where I was. I was lost.

I often went on backpacking trips as a child and youth. When trails were not so obvious or well-traveled we looked for ducks. Ducks helped us find our way. I'm not talking about mallards, but about manmade landmarks. You may know them as cairns but they are stacks of at least three or more rocks, that help guide people towards the right destination.



These mark the way when a trail is not clear and you can even set them up if you are blazing a new trail. They help prevent us from becoming lost by helping us remember the way we or others before us had come.

In the Joshua passage we heard, the Hebrew people had finally just crossed the Jordan river into the land of Israel after 40 years of wandering, and they placed the stones.

The stones were there to remind them of their God and what God had done for them. The passage implies that they are there to help guide the future generations in remembering.

There are so many things that our society collectively uses as landmarks to guide our lives by. Yet it seems to me that our way of life can become a race where we rarely take the time to stop and ask:

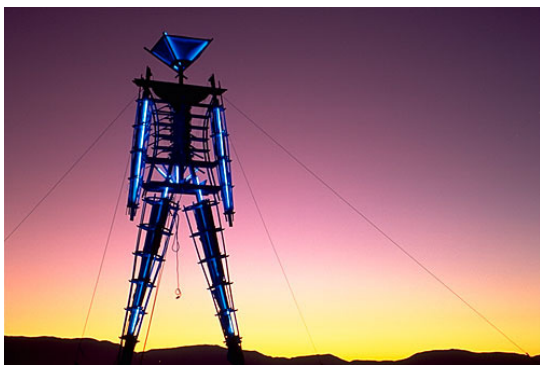
Where are we going?

Is there a promised land or purpose ahead, or are we plodding, or sprinting, along a path, with no real thought about where we are going? How do we stop and remember the promises of God?

People are looking for a way beyond the common paths we are all on.

I see people looking for something in Burning Man. Burning man is....how to define Burning Man? I've never gone but Wikipedia describes it as:

...a week-long annual event held in the Black Rock Desert in northern Nevada, in the United States. The event starts on the Monday before, and ends on the day of the American Labor Day holiday. It takes its name from the ritual burning of a large wooden effigy (slide – neon) on Saturday evening. (slide - burning) The event is described by many participants as an experiment in community, radical self-expression, and radical self-reliance.ⁱⁱ



Unless you're prepared for radical self-expression, don't Google it.

It can be easy to ridicule but this isn't just a bunch of Berkeley residents in the desert. It is frequented by successful people, many working in the tech industry. Maybe some of you? What is clear about it is that it is an event that really is defining for many people. They find meaning in it and are drawn to it year after year. Many can't even fully articulate why they like it so much, but they're drawn to it. Certainly, beyond the spectacle of it all there is a big emphasis on less consumerism and more community and sustainability, things that speak to many of us.

People want more than a life marked simply by successes in education and careers. They're looking for larger landmarks than those. They want meaning, they want mystery, and they want something bigger than just themselves. They are looking for purpose and promise, not just progress. And in some respects, I think the burning of a giant man effigy has in it a proclamation that humanity is lost. Not necessarily that what they are doing is proof of how lost we are, but that they are recognizing that humanity is lost in some or many respects.

In fact, in describing the theme for this year, Rites of Passage, the organizers write:

We are living in a period of widespread fear and insecurity. We cling to what we have, but what we've had was merely the illusion of a mortgaged future. Nothing that we see around us feels sustainable. As one who blunders off a cliff, our legs still twiddle in the air: we haven't gained a foothold that will see us through.^v

In other words, we're lost.

When I was lost on those dark blocks of Sunnyvale, parked on the side of the road, searching my phone for an address or number, I was trying to figure out my next step, feeling insecure and fearful that I was a horrible pastor. I got a text from one of the members with a friendly question, "Hey, were you coming to the meeting tonight?" With that text I had a number, and I called and embarrassingly and humbly admit, "I'm lost."

As soon as he started telling me the way I realized that I had somehow swapped one of the major streets for another. My memory was corrupted and all I needed was to hear the name of the correct street and it all came back to me.

There was a gracious person who reminded me the way, he became the landmark, the duck that I needed.

The letter to the Ephesians begins with this language that really is a landmark for us, a duck that points us in the right direction. It has one of the most beautiful reminders of who God is, who and where we are in God. It jogs our spiritual memory of God's promise and assures us of the grace and forgiveness that await us in Christ.

It affirms that in Christ we are:

- Blessed,
- chosen,
- adopted as God's children,
- bestowed with glorious grace,
- are Beloved,
- redeemed and forgiven of our trespasses (otherwise known as errant journeys and being lost),

- we are lavished with grace,
- we are heirs.
- We have been given wisdom and insight to know the great mystery
- We are part of God's great plan,
- We have obtained an inheritance
- We are destined with a purpose
- We have been marked by God.

God has left God's mark in us with the Holy Spirit. God's very presence living in us.

We are marked.

We have markers in our sanctuary. There is the baptismal font signifying God's promise of new life in Christ, from being lost to being found through grace. Here is the Table of the Lord's Supper, proclaiming God's promise to us of forgiveness and communion with God and one another. The choir, the organ and instruments, the art and banners, all point to how God speaks through beauty and creativity by revealing truth that words alone do not convey. The Cross, once an instrument of execution is now a symbol of hope. The pulpit affirms that we have been given God's Word and where we hear and are reminded of who God is and who we are in God. All of these things are markers for us of God's promise and for each of you one may be a more potent reminder than another.

Yet God so loves the people who pass by here every day and who may know nothing of these markers. God so deeply loves everyone. God wants to call out to them and say, "Where are you? Are you coming?" God is not content to live strictly within these walls and desires to place landmarks throughout this earth, and for every person.

How will we, God's people, speak to one another and to those who are searching? How do we call out to them and attract them even if they can't even articulate what it really is that keeps them returning? What is our Burning Man?

We have all these landmarks I mentioned here in the sanctuary but are these all we have? I didn't mention the purpose we even have all of these, You. You and I, the Body of Christ. The people of God, the Beloved in Christ. Marked with the Holy Spirit. The fire of God, filling you, who are placed in the world as landmarks for God.

It's true. You are a duck. We are God's ducks. We have been marked by God and now mark the wide landscape of a lost world. Perhaps you feel as I can feel, inadequate to stand for God. Yet remember, it is not our ability or knowledge that makes us markers. It is God's

Spirit in us.

A couple of things to help us be ducks:

Mark times in each day to remember God. I may just read this Ephesians passage each morning to point me in the right direction. Perhaps the family will stack some rocks in our yard that we see when we are coming and going, and maybe we create a space in our home, to artistically express our spiritual truths, longings, and questions. Daily landmarks in our home to tell and

remind our children of how mighty our God is, and of how Beloved we are in Christ. We have such a gift to proclaim to our children and the world.

I will also remember those markers that God has placed in my life.. Those burning with the Holy Spirit. Tomorrow, Memorial Day, as many remember loved ones who have died, I remember my grandmother. My mother's mom. She may have not been a soldier but she was a dutiful child of God. It is really her faith that I remember her for. She talked about Jesus and God's love to anybody, in a sweet and loving way, without an agenda. It just overflowed from her. And how she prayed. In her last decade of life she lived with my aunt in Marin County, and came into my aunts wild community of activists and spiritual-but-not-religious people and it soon became known that she prayed. Unlikely people began to confide in her and she said she would pray for them. And she did. And those prayers were being answered. Pretty soon, all sorts of people would call my aunt with prayer requests to give to my Grandmother. People who did not consider themselves religious, and definitely not Christians, were seeing evidence of God's love for them in answered prayers. My Grandmother Marge became sort of a monument for God and God's love for people in Marin County. She pointed the way for me so many times when I was lost and I pray that I can be half the monument to God's Glory that she was.

You are marked by God. You are loved by God. The Spirit of God lives in you. Knowing that, remembering that throughout our day wherever we may be is where it starts. When we really get that, then we can't help but become markers that testify to God's love for those who are lost.

ⁱ http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2425/3786811756_ab496e385a.jpg

ⁱⁱ Wikipedia – Burning Man http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burning_Man

ⁱⁱⁱ http://laughingsquid.com/wp-content/uploads/burning_man_1991.jpg

^{iv} <http://danceparadenewyork.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/burning-man.jpg?w=450&h=300>

^v Burning Man Website http://www.burningman.com/art_of_burningman/bm11_theme.html