

August 28, 2011

UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES

TWO roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Make no mistake; I am a Robert Frost fan. His poetry is apt to have almost as much chance of getting into my sermon as a quote from C.S. Lewis. The preceding poem is likely his most famous and popular. “The road less traveled,” is a phrase that is etched into our culture’s

canon and psyche. “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” “The road less traveled,” of course is not the title of the poem, though most think it is. The title of the poem is “The Road Not Taken”. And it is to suggest, as least in my mind, that life is filled with endless choices – often choices that at first glance don’t seem that much different. The pros and cons are close to the same. The paths before us equally lay in leaves no steps have trodden black. Which way do I go? Should I go this way or go that way? I don’t know. But whatever choice I make I am affected equally by the road I’ve taken and the road I’ve not taken. One never is given to learn what the road not taken would have been like. The clock never gets turned back. So the choices we make are always enormous, whether we like it or not. Whatever road we take makes all the difference, says Mr. Frost.

I think of the movie that came out about ten years ago called *Cast Away*. A movie about a man named Chuck Noland who ends up the sole survivor of a plane crash, stranded on a deserted island – thousands of miles away from where anyone would think to search for him. Four years pass before he makes the daring attempt to leave the island and get rescued. Which he is ... only to find that because everyone had given him up for dead they had moved on with their lives. His fiancée has married and has kids. And the movie ends with Chuck out west somewhere in the middle of nowhere standing at the crossroads of four roads the lead east,

west, north and south – and he can choose any one he wishes. Literally his life is starting over. And the road he chooses will make as much difference as the roads he doesn't choose.

Now the truth of the matter is you don't have to survive a plane crash, flee a deserted island and get rescued from sea in order to start your life over. You don't need to be a Chuck Noland to get landed at a crossroads. The truth is ... we land at a crossroads every day of our lives. That's just the way life is ... we get landed at a crossroads every day. Just like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz – that Kansas cyclone picks her off the Kansas prairie (at least in her dream) and lands her at the crossroads of her life. At the edge of the yellow brick road – and at the path between the witch of the north, the east and the west – (I always wondered what happened to the witch of the south – I guess the south was witchless). But life is like that ... isn't it? It lands us – usually by the choices we've made in the past – at a crossroads everyday – and we get to choose now, today which path I am going to take.

Now there are, in fact, lots of people that don't want to see life that way. Lots of people don't see the crossroads presented in every day. Instead what they want to believe is that they are on a road that they can't get off. That for whatever reason they have no choice but to stay on the path they're on. There may very well be exit ramps off the road, intersections they are passing that present choices and options and new directions – but for a thousand different

reasons they think the path they got on is the path they have to stay on. Many people's lives are informed more by the road they've been on – than the roads and intersections that lie before them.

The person, let's say, that gets on some sort of career path. At a young age they jump on the road of a certain work life – and they get some point and they say – boy, I'd love to do something different – but I am so far down this road – I am afraid to get off. I better stay put.

Or people who travel the road of family dysfunction. They stay on this road and keep letting the past dysfunction of their life inform who they are and it becomes such a part of their identity – that they resist taking the road to something new and healthy.

Or the people on the road of unhealthy habits and addictions. The road spirals downward – and there is person after person on the side of the road with signs that say, “Turn here, turn here!” But they ignore the signs because the pattern is too comfortable, too much a part of who they are. Or they refuse to acknowledge how helpless they are.

We are so eager, aren't we, to abdicate our freedom – to assume that we don't have any choices. "I would have done something different," we say, "but I didn't have a choice." But of course it isn't true – we always have choices. It's what got Adam and Eve into trouble ... when they insisted first to themselves and then to God – that they didn't have a choice when it came to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God confronts Adam and Adam says, "The woman gave it to me to eat ... I didn't have a choice." So God confronts Eve and Eve says, "The serpent gave it to me to eat, I didn't have a choice." We are eager to play victim to the circumstances of our lives.

Like the guy who asked his friend how he was. And the friend said, "Well, under the circumstances, not so well." And his friend said, "Well what are you doing under there then?"

Good question.

It's a question I believe Jeremiah points to when in our text today he speaks to a nation, and to a people, who are on the wrong path. They are on the express train heading in the wrong direction. They are becoming less and less the children of God and more and more the children of a confusing world. They are getting signals from the peoples around them that they should

be one thing or another thing ... that they should be concerned about this thing and that thing – and they are losing touch with the heart of God. They are losing their sense of what is important to God. They are interested in the thing that's new. The thing that suggests progress. They are making life more about themselves. They don't care anymore about the people that God cares about – the poor, the helpless, the lonely, the disenfranchised. And the longer down this road they go ... the less and less they think they have a choice. It's just the way life is. Nothing you can do to change it! "Hey," they said to themselves, "we're living in the sixth century now (sixth century B.C., that is) and we have to keep up with the times!" And they slip further and further from God.

So Jeremiah says in verse 16: "Stand at the crossroads!" In other words – as much as you may not think there is another viable path – open your eyes and see that you still have a choice. More than one road lies before you. Acknowledge that with every day comes another crossroads. Today you get to choose what path you're going to take. "Stand at the crossroads and look!" he says. Consider a different way!

Frederick Douglass – the great former slave who advocated for freedom and abolition – said once that he prayed for years and years that God would set him free, but it wasn't until his prayers made their way down to his feet and he ran away – that his prayers were answered."

Sometimes we have to stand at the crossroads and see that there is more than one path to be on. Sometimes we have to make a choice.

But Jeremiah points to more than that. “Ask for,” he says, “ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it and find rest for your souls.” The ancient paths. The ancient paths. “Don’t ask for the new thing,” Jeremiah says. “Don’t go chasing after the latest thing to come down the pike.” There is a way that is as old as the hills. And the reason it’s as old as the hills ... is that it withstands the test of time. It’s the old path ... because it’s the best path. It’s where the good way lies. It’s where you find rest for your souls. Where you find rest for your souls.

Do you hear the echo of Jesus? “Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and gentle of heart and you shall find rest for your souls.” That while we so often choose the path that ends up beating our souls, roughing up our souls, dampening our souls, breaking our souls – Jesus says, Jeremiah says – there is an ancient path ... an ancient path – where the good way lies ... where you find rest for your souls.

It's not always an easy path. It's seldom a glamorous path. It's not the path that necessarily gets you everything you think you want – but it is the path where the good way lies. The path where you wake up and you say to yourself, “It is well with my soul.”

What a wonderful goal in life – to be able to say, “It is well with my soul.”

There is a wonderful scene in C.S. Lewis' story *Prince Caspian* where the four Pevensie children are trying to make their way through unfamiliar territory and they get to a point where two paths diverge. The one road looks a little dangerous and somewhat in the direction away from where they think they need to go. The other road appears to make a little more sense. But as they are trying to decide Lucy, the youngest child, sees in the distance down the more difficult path the faint image of Aslan the Lion – the Christ figure. It is apparent to her that this is the way for them to go. But the rest of the children don't see the Lion so they disregard Lucy's eyewitness and the group votes against her and choose the seemingly better path. Lucy follows behind. Sure enough, it's a path that only gets them into more trouble. Finally when they are now in a little over their heads – Aslan appears up close and person before Lucy again and this time they talk. Lucy explains to Aslan that though she saw him, and though she knew which path to choose – she didn't really have a choice because the others wanted to go the other way. She felt she “had” to go with them. Aslan looks at her with doubt in his eyes.

Lewis tells the rest of the story this way: Lucy says to Aslan, “How could I – I couldn’t have left the others and come up to you alone, how could I? (Aslan just stares at her.) Don’t look at me like that ... oh well, I suppose I *could*. Yes, and I wouldn’t have been alone, I know, not if I was with you. But what would have been the good?”

Aslan said nothing.

“You mean,” said Lucy rather faintly, “that it would have turned out all right – somehow? But how? Please, Aslan? Am I not to know?”

“To know what *would* have happened, child?” said Aslan, “No. Nobody is ever told that.”

“Oh dear,” said Lucy.

“But anyone can find out what *will* happen,” said Aslan. “If you go back to the others now, wake them up; and tell them you have seen me again; and that you must all get up at once and follow me – what will happen? There is only way of finding out.”

There is only one way of finding out. The only way of finding out ... is to choose. But before you can choose you have to stand at the crossroads. You have to see that every day, no matter who you are, no matter where you are, the crossroads are before you. “Stand at the crossroads and look. The road you’ve been on doesn’t have to be the road you stay on. God

gives you that choice and maybe today is the day you make it. And if today is the day to make it ... don't dare put it off until tomorrow. For why has the path led you here today? But to give you maybe the chance to choose a different road. The ancient path. The time tested path. Where the good way lies.

Come under me all of you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me – for I am meek and gentle of heart – and you shall find rest for your souls.

The ancient path. Where the good way lies. All the way to the place where we can finally say – it is well with my soul.