

## Proper 9 Year B You Cant Get There From Here

A few summers ago we were driving down from the Appalachians toward the coast of South Carolina, and characteristically a few hours behind schedule. We were hoping to make a stop in Congaree Swamp National Park before the visitor center closed for the day at 5 o'clock, so we used our GPS to find the fastest route into the park. Before long we had left the highway, speeding along secondary roads that were curiously lacking any kind of signage for the park. When the ditches along the side of the road disappeared, and then the painted stripes from the pavement, we began to wonder whether this might not be the right way. But, we were committed, so we explained it away by deciding that we were going into the park through some secret back entrance. And then there was no more pavement. The GPS, though, said we were only a mile from our destination at this point, so we didn't have much to lose by pushing on. So we pointed the car down a sandy one-lane road with gnarly oak limbs dangling Spanish moss over our heads. At the next bend, the road got narrower still – narrow enough that backtracking wasn't really an option any longer. And then we arrived, or at least, we couldn't go any farther. We drove right into a yard with a tidy brick house and a few cars parked in the driveway. One of the cars literally blocked the path our GPS wanted us to take, a path which was little more than a walking trail into the dark overgrowth.

As we sat there in the driveway, feeling the full weight of our smart-phone's betrayal, I saw someone moving by the house. I got out of the car to meet a man in blue coveralls wielding a push-broom. His bent body showed the marks of a long life, and his friendly eyes made me smile a little as he extended his hand to greet me.

"Hi," he said, "my name's Angus. Where are you trying to get to?"

"We were trying to find the National Park," I said, "and my GPS says it's just down the hill right here through the woods."

"This path goes right down to the river, and that's the park boundary I guess," he said with a smile.

I had the distinct impression that Angus had had this conversation more than once. He told me so a minute or two later, and I asked him how I might get into the park without swimming the river.

"Well," he said, "you can't get there from here."

In every good undertaking, we're likely to run into some resistance now and again. Up to this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus has encountered two primary sources of resistance in his ministry of teaching and healing: demons, and his family of origin. I'm sure there are some here today who find this combination ironic. There are others, I'm sure, for whom these terms are interchangeable already! Either way, when you upset the status quo, you're likely to ruffle some feathers, to find people or circumstances working to hedge you in, to put you back where they think you ought to be. Jesus could work no miracles among his hometown friends and family – not because his deeds were not miraculous I'm sure, but because he no longer fit in the place they had constructed for him in their minds and hearts.

A laborer, a son, a brother, someone to help at harvest time and serve the occasional term on the finance committee, a good match for the daughter of a family friend. "That Jesus, he was such a good boy! What happened to him?" And now here he was, one of their own, living hand to mouth, walking to highways and byways, getting in trouble with the law and irritating the local ministers, and here he comes rolling into town with a bunch of loud smelly fishermen from down by the lake. "Somebody needs to set this kid straight," they're thinking to themselves, and they don't even notice the good he does. Or perhaps they attribute it to dumb luck or sleight of hand. "He's no miracle-worker. Don't give that pack one red cent! That boy needs to come on back home and help his mom."

Resistance is everywhere, and in the ancient world, it took on a personified form. Just as we have given a name and a personality to all that is good in the universe, we have a shorthand for all that stands in the way. It is that other personality, the one whose sheer tackiness makes him practically unavailable to Episcopalians: the devil. Now if you ask me point blank if I think there's really a devil, I'll hedge the same way every time: the Bible sure seems to think there is. If we can glean something useful from the gradual development of humans' perception of God and put it to use in our lives, the same is true about the scriptures that name Satan and demons.

The oldest word of Satan in Hebrew is derived from the word for 'obstacle.' Over time, the sense of the reality behind this name became not just some passive stumbling block, but an altogether active and malevolent force in the world, an enemy who resists us in our every attempt to reach out and find connection with God.

We often joke about the devil we know, or talk about how hard it is to treat an old dog new tricks. It's human nature to think that everything is fine just the way it is. What Jesus really did to upset the status quo was to give his disciples a language for naming resistance and casting it aside. To claim the power that we can change old patterns and walk away from destructive habits that enslave us is unsettling, and people would rather not hear it. This goes hand with their insistence that we must repent, which is shorthand for saying "change everything!"

The mission Jesus gave them came fast on the heels of Jesus' own experience with resistance from his childhood friends and mentors. He sent the disciples out with strict rules to take nothing extra, and to leave quickly when people wouldn't listen - shaking the dust off their feet as they walked away. And this is the life of faith, boiled down. When you don't have any resources to speak of, relationships become absolutely crucial, and relationships are the building blocks of communion of God's kingdom. When relationships do not materialize, when resistance crops up, they need to get moving quickly.

Practically speaking, mission is by definition an activity of creating and sustaining change. As such, no matter what mission God has us on, we will always encounter resistance. You'll notice it in the subtly hostile actions of those in authority all the way down to the insecure thoughts in your own head. The earliest Christians had the sense that resisting the devil was a way to keep in shape for doing good mission work. When they encountered challenge in their ministry, the conflict became a vehicle for personal growth. To walk

away from it was to invite disaster. As a good friend told me once around the campfire: the path of least resistance is what makes rivers and people crooked.

The spiritual life, then, is one of conflict and resistance at times. In fact, over time the resistance we encounter from family or church structures or odd regulations will gradually shape and strengthen us in mission. The best lives, and the best missions, are often defined by the difficulties they overcome. Repentance is a way of life, an acknowledgement that we haven't arrived yet, and there is still more that needs to be changed; in our personal lives, in our shared communities, and in the world at large. If we hope for a life of faith that comes predigested, with a clear path laid out and smooth sailing until the end, we're going to run into Angus. Like Jesus, like the disciples, he's going to tell us that we have to turn around and go another way. He won't much care how we feel about it, because he knows the truth already. Without obstacles, without challenges, without sabotage and outright defiance, without knowing how to recognize our enemies, there is no way forward. Until we accept the truth that is active resistance to living out our faith, until we know in our bones that change - no matter how uneasy it makes us - is central to spirituality, then what Angus said is true: you can't get there from here.