

## **John 14:1-14**

I like maps. I love maps. If I know about a road trip I have coming up well in advance, I might spend months looking at a map. When I'm in the car, but not driving, on a trip like that I will always have the map either open on my lap or right next to me. GPS systems are great in many situations, but for me, they can't replace a map. I'll always study a map before I go, and I'll always have one on the seat right next to me when I'm driving to or through an unfamiliar place. That's because with a map I can see where I am, where I'm going, and how I'm going to get there. I don't like getting my directions just one turn at a time. I don't want to know only what road I will take next. I want to know the road after that and the road after that. I want to know all the roads I'm going to take.

Unfortunately, circumstances don't always allow us to see the big picture in quite this way. You might be aware of this. I'm not just talking about road trips any more; of course, I'm talking about life. Even if we are given an idea of where we are going to end up – even if we work to come up with such a vision on our own – it is unlikely that we will be given or be able to chart a map that shows us every step and every turn that will take us from here to there. Strategic plans look good on paper, but life, as they say, is what happens while we're making those plans. I could see on a map this week exactly what lay between my hotel in downtown Minneapolis and my quiet little spot on Beach Drive here in Monticello. I could even use Google Maps on my phone to see how well the traffic was moving in urban areas or where there was construction. There are no such devices that show us every obstacle or detour we will

encounter in the next 5, 10, or 20 years of life. We don't even know what might pop up on the horizon tomorrow. If only there were an app for that.

If only we could know whether our test scores would be high enough to get us into the school of our choice or earn us enough scholarships to pay for it. Or if only we could know at least that we would make enough money after college to justify the debt our degree requires. If only we could know how long a job will last, how many years we might go without a raise, or when the plant will move overseas. If only we could know when the car will break down, when the kids get hurt, or when a new one will be conceived. If only something or someone could tell us all that. If only someone could've told us that the house would never sell. If only someone could've told us that we wouldn't be able to afford the house after 2008. If only we could've known when the stroke would happen or how many good days we would have this month. If only someone could tell us how much time we have left. Since we're all here this morning, and the world did not end yesterday, we probably all agree that these things are usually pretty difficult to predict.

There is no road map for life. The Bible is sometimes referred to that way, but I'm not sure that's the best way to think about it. The Bible uses much more ink telling us what has happened in the past than it does telling us what will happen in the future. The Bible simply does not and will not give us turn-by-turn directions to help us get from here to our destiny. It will, however, do two things: it will remind us of God's faithfulness through all the ups and downs of history and of life, and it will offer God's promise of a safe destination that will be reached at last.

That destination is where Jesus started with his disciples in the passage we read this morning. This is one of the passages I read Friday at the funeral of Ruth McFadden. It is often read at funerals, and we can see why. These are comforting words Jesus offers, but in this context he doesn't speak them following a death. Instead he offers them before a death – his own. This conversation takes place between Jesus and his disciples on the night of his betrayal and arrest. He knows what is about to happen in the hours to come, and he knows his disciples will need comfort and encouragement, so he says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. My Father's house has plenty of room; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

The disciples really had no idea that Jesus was about to leave on a trip. He announced that the time of his departure had arrived earlier that evening. When Judas left the last supper to go out and betray him, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him," and "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." The destination for Jesus and, ultimately, for his followers is his Father's house, as he put it, which has plenty of room. Jesus was headed to the cross, which he knew would lead him back to God. The promise for the disciples and for us is that we will eventually join him in God's presence. It is a wonderful promise to hold in our hearts and keep the eyes of our souls lifted upwards – the promise that God does have a place prepared for us, that the journey does have an end with a safe lodging at the last, that we will not

wander aimlessly or endlessly, that God is leading us somewhere, somewhere safe and good.

But when Jesus says, “You know the way to the place where I am going,” Thomas, the one we can always count on to be honest, openly objects. “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” he says. Thomas knows as well as we do, that there is no road map through life, and he is very transparent with Jesus about the anxiety that brings. “I’m not even sure what you’re talking about, let alone where to go from here.” Thomas is the one we all need to have in math class. When the teacher goes over an example too quickly and says, “Okay, you can do the rest on your own,” Thomas is the one who shoots his hand up into the air and says, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, I do not understand how to do this.” Or to return to our previous metaphor, Thomas is the one who, when no one will say where they want to go eat, will slam on the brakes at the end of the driveway and say, “Hold on. Where are we going? I don’t know which way to turn if I don’t know where we’re going.”

Jesus’ response to Thomas is a verse many of us know well. When Thomas says, “No, we don’t know the way,” Jesus replies, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” With that second sentence, Jesus reiterates the destination as well. “No one comes to the Father.” That’s where Jesus is going, and that’s where his followers are headed, too. So, that much we know, and it is comforting to us. The hard part is getting there. And that is the story of the Christian life. The Christian life is getting from here to there, journeying from where we are to our destiny in the presence of God. In fact, that is the story of human history: the

journey of this world from where it began to God's appointed end – not end in the sense of destruction, but destination.

Jesus tells us that the way to our destination only exists because of him. “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Without Jesus there would be no way. We would be lost forever. If we had a map showing where we are and where God is, there would be no road connecting the two without Jesus. My guess is they wouldn't even be on the same continent. Or planet, maybe. But Jesus has made a way. The way he took was the way of the cross, showing to a world hopelessly alienated from God the depth of God's mercy and love, overcoming our separation from God and bringing us to trust God again. After many ages of not trusting God, Jesus makes a way for us to trust him again. If we trust in Jesus, then we trust in God. If we trust in Jesus, then we can find our way home.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.” Trusting God – that is how we find our way through life with no road map, only the promise of a destination. Jesus helps us to trust God by showing us that it's possible to do so all the way through life and still arrive at your destination. The life of Jesus, lived in peace and compassion for all in spite of the violence inflicted upon him, and the death of Jesus, conquered by resurrection, prove that God is trustworthy. Jesus proves to us that God wants us all to get home safely. And only Jesus can get us there. If we were given a road map to find our own way, we know very well that it would no longer be God's way, but our way we traveled.

I always take a sort of delight in defying GPS systems. Every time that voice from the box says “recalculating” or “turn around” I scoff, I laugh, and I raise my fist. I know better. I know where I’m going. I am going *this* way. You are the one who is going to have to adjust, lady. I was so pleased with myself on Thursday as I was traveling down from Wisconsin that I had timed my departure perfectly to arrive in Chicago at 11:00 a.m. – a beautiful time for traffic. So as I was coming down Interstate 90, and the lady in the box told me to get off on 290 to go around the city through the west suburbs I ignored her. It’s the middle of the day, I said. I’m going through the city, not around it. She tried again at 294, another chance to skirt around the heart of town, but to no avail. I was resolute.

Time after time she suggested exits where I could turn around and avoid the path to destruction, but I knew better. We are going downtown today! I said aloud. And I was very satisfied with myself. Right on past O’Hare, traffic was moving briskly. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. Nothing can stop me now, I thought, I’ll be on the skyway in no time, soaring into Indiana. I came up on the express lanes off to the left. No sense in moving over there. Traffic in every lane was moving just as freely. But only moments after that I came up over a rise and caught my first glimpse of brake lights. My heart sank, and soon it was stop and go – while the express lanes zoomed. When they rejoined us, it got even worse. I knew it wouldn’t clear up until I was past the Eisenhower Expressway or maybe even I-55. How could this have happened? It was 11:00! I had done this before. I left my hotel in Wisconsin at just the right time. I knew better than the lady in the box. I had a strategic plan for getting through Chicago! I had

a map! And I had the lessons I had learned in the past. Now I had one more. I watched my estimated arrival time on the GPS slip and slip. It changed so dramatically that the lady in the box had to announce it: “New arrival time.” Apparently, I had lost half an hour, because I insisted on doing things my own way. She was reassuring though, “You are still on the fastest route.” She knew my ego needed that.

I still got home without any real trouble. I still made it from somewhere well north of Madison all the way to Fair Oaks without stopping to use the restroom. I don’t know how construction or the extra mileage might have slowed me down on the loop around the city, but things did not go as I had hoped. They did not go as I had planned.

The point here is not that God is like a GPS system and that as long as we listen to that still small voice coming from the dash we will be guided through life without error. The point is that we are not always as smart or as capable as we think we are. The point is that we don’t know everything; we cannot foresee every challenge. The point is that if left to our own devices we are very likely to make mistakes, even with a map. And, in any case, there is no map. We cannot find our way to our destination on our own.

The only way to get there is to trust God. Sometimes we will choose the wrong road, sometimes we will travel down it for miles and miles before we have the courage to admit that we are lost. Sometimes we will make poor choices. We might spend years in a job that we hate, because we think it is the only way to get where we want to be. We may stay in an abusive relationship for far too long, because we don’t think we have the ability to travel on our own. We may consistently underestimate our own potential,

thinking the journey is simply too much – better to stay close to home. Maybe we just have a terrible sense of direction. Every turn seems to be a wrong one.

Life has many ups and downs, many twists and turns that we cannot ultimately predict. Many of you this morning may feel like you are about to set out on a journey that fills you with trepidation. The way does not seem clear. Maybe you are about to graduate from high school. Maybe you want to make a change in your career or start a new relationship or end one. Maybe you know you will have to move out of your house soon, or you're wondering how much longer you can take care of yourself. You may be about to travel through territory you've never seen before. The only thing you can do is step forward, trusting God, knowing that God can be trusted, that a way has been provided, and that even if you make mistakes along the way, even if unforeseen challenges come, there is grace.

As long as we trust in God we are not finally lost. There is a way to get from where we are to where God wants us to be. It's not on any map, but Jesus has traveled this way, and he promises us that if we trust him, if we follow him we are on it.