Love wins

“HANG IN THERE”

One of the most frustrating questions children can ask is: “Are we there yet?” When my dad died we were living in Stoke-on-Trent and instead of moving to London, as we would have done had he lived, we moved to Wimborne in Dorset where mum grew up. Because dad had made many significant friends in other parts of the country we would sometimes travel to visit them. This was important to mum having been forced to move away from people she knew well. In those days, the early 70’s, car journeys could be very slow! I’m sure mum could not have looked forward to the journey with three young children in tow! My sister always got to sit in the front on the basis she was the only one who could map read! So me and my lovely brother had to sit in the back! Any journey we did was at least a five hour journey and it wouldn’t be long before the inevitable question was asked: “Are we there yet?”

Parents think up inventive strategies to cope with this kind of dynamic don’t they? Recognizing that the repetitive nature of this question was going to drive her insane (excuse the pun!), she came up with a clever strategy to keep us boys happy. As is often the case when parents try to manage their children, it involved sweets!

Mum identified certain places along the route at which point on the journey we would be allowed a sweet! Even to this day I associate Peterborough with sweets! It was a successful strategy to a point! It deflected us from thinking about the end of the journey, but we then focused on the next sweet stop: “Are we there yet?” However much we asked the question, and however much time we had spent in the car, we only ever got one answer: “We’re getting there!”

Imagine going on a journey, asking the question: “are we there yet?” and getting this answer: “we’re not there yet. We won’t get there today. We won’t get there tomorrow. In fact this journey will take a lifetime. We’re going on a journey to

the best place of all. We'll definitely get there, but we're not there yet. We're getting there!"

The people of Israel prepare to go on a journey.

Exodus 15

22 Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur.
For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. 23 When they
came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why
the place is called Marah) 24 So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What
are we to drink?"

25 Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood.
He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink.

There the LORD issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test.
26 He said, "If you listen carefully to the LORD your God and do what is right in his
eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not
bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD,
who heals you."

27 Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm
trees, and they camped there near the water.

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin,
which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after
they had come out of Egypt. 2 In the desert the whole community grumbled
against Moses and Aaron. 3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the
LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we
wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire
assembly to death." (Exodus 15 v 22 – 16 v 3)

This was supposed to be a very simple journey. This was a journey that would take them to the Promised Land. This was a journey from slavery to freedom, from poverty to abundance. God was going to bring them out, and God was going to bring them in. This was a journey that was not especially long, less than 200 miles. They could look forward to being in the promised land relatively soon after

leaving Egypt if they were to go by the shortest route. But we all know that they didn't go by the shortest route did they?

I wonder if you know the reasons behind that! Ah – yes! It was because they were disobedient and grumbled against God. That's true, they were disobedient and they did grumble against God, but even if they hadn't they still would not have gone by the shortest route.

"When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. (Exodus 13 v 17 -18)

From the beginning of this journey God had an alternative route to the shortest route in mind! Truth is, the Israelites were never going to get to the Promised Land by the shortest route. I'm sure if you'd asked them at the beginning of the journey which route they'd prefer to take, they'd have said the shorter one! They wanted to get to where they were going. But God didn't ask them, and neither did he plan to take them by the shortest route.

Why?

Because he loved them because he loved them because he loved…It was precisely because he loved his people that he didn't take them on the shortest route. Look at the text: "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt." God recognized they were full of fear and had little faith…So rather than have them return to Egypt, he takes them the long way home! Because of their disobedience and grumbling, the long way became even longer! Imagine: "Are we there yet?" " No! But be patient!"

Could it be friends that God still takes his people via the long way home…because he loves them? Could it be, friends, that God is taking you the long way home precisely because he loves you? The question for the people of Israel was: will they still follow God even when they don't understand the way God is leading? The question for you is: will you still follow God even when you don't understand

the way God is leading? "Are we there yet?" "Not yet. One day, but not yet. Be patient!"

And God takes the people of Israel to the Promised Land by way of the desert, which turned out to be no minor detour! The desert is the place you did not want to go. It's certainly not the Promised Land: it's dry and barren, a place where life is bleak! If you follow God for long enough you will discover that he sometimes take us on the long way home. There are times when following God is easy and times when following God is hard; times when faith is easy and times when faith is so very hard; times when prayer is easy and times when it is anything but.

Our journey into the desert is usually triggered by some event: a relationship shatters; a child rebels; financial disaster; a dream dies and so do you. Sometimes we find ourselves in the desert for no apparent reason at all: times when God seems far away; worship is a struggle; the bible gives no comfort; confusion lingers and no answers seem forthcoming.

Perhaps one challenge we face in our desert time is that God is never in a hurry. We are almost always in a hurry, but God is not and God's way is rarely the quickest simply because it is an expression of the love he has for each one of us and because he loves us in the desert and he is always at work in the mess.

To love someone means you want to see them grow and mature. Sometimes God takes us the long way, the way of the desert so that we can grow up and mature. CS Lewis said that early in the Christian life God makes it easy for us to worship and pray – we have a hunger and desire. But, he says, God doesn't allow that to last. God, he says, withdraws and leaves us to stand on our own two legs – to carry our duties from our will. He says God does it this way because that is when we begin to grow and mature into the people God wants us to be. It leads Lewis to say, that the prayers prayed from the desert, are the ones that please God the most!

The desert is often a place of strengthening. God did not take the Israelites the shortest way because they were frightened of the Philistines and he knew they might give up!

I was turned down the first time I applied to train for this ministry as many of you know! God took me, and Lisa, and you actually, the long way – the way of the desert for me! For a while afterwards I was ready to give up on the dream, but God given dreams do not go away. I'd like to think, and I think it would be true to say, that that couple of years in that desert, has in ways I'll probably never see or understand, enabled me to keep going in ministry now!

I'm certainly not alone in knowing the long way home. Joseph, David, Daniel – to name just three others who had the same experience. And you…maybe right now experiencing the desert! It took me a long time to come to hold the possibility that the long way into ministry was the better way.

How are you doing? Will you follow…however long it might take?

Jesus faced his severest temptation in the desert. It was in the desert that he faced the temptation to turn aside from following the will of his Father. It was in the desert he was tempted to take a short cut rather than pursue the long way home. The desert can bring temptation. If you're in the desert how are you doing? Perhaps you wrestle over the same sin; perhaps your marriage has become a desert experience; perhaps you have a difficult person in your life; perhaps you are considering a relationship that you know would be destructive and dishonouring to God.

The desert is the place we learn to obey and choose to follow when obeying and following are no longer easy. In God's love it can become a place of great strength. Friends, it may just be that the desert place is the place where I most know and experience God's love. It's easy to think God loves me when things are going well, but when I don't get that career move I was hoping for, that new dream house, that success I crave, the health I long for, the marriage I dreamed of, the reputation I think I deserve…then I find out whether I love God for God's sake or because he gives me what I think I want!

When I love God for God's sake, then I open myself up to fully knowing and loving God and being fully known and loved by God. The desert is not the Promised Land, but it is, always a gift of love.

Are we there yet? No, it's a lifelong journey, but in the desert, when God takes us the long way home, we have hope. It is precisely because God himself in Jesus took the long way home, through the desert, that we can find hope in the desert.

Life is full of tragedy, but not catastrophes. Catastrophes are found where there is no story, so what happens to us in life is random, meaningless and without any kind of purpose. I meet people who lives are full of catastrophes…sadly! But it does not have to be that way, because we can be part of a story, God's story, where catastrophes become tragedies. The difference: tragedy, as part of God's story, can be redeemed. Tragedy still strikes, but in one fine hour it can be redeemed. We still get hurt, have to live with pain, suffer all kids of setbacks but in one bright hour it will be redeemed. In one bright hour, tears of sadness will become tears of joy. In one bright hour the waiting will be over and we will say "Are we there yet?" The answer will be: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter the joy of the Lord."

In one bright hour he will come for me, and you and your story and my story will be complete in his story. Friends, hang in there for one bright hour is coming to you!

Preached in Crawley Baptist church on Sunday 15th July 2012 by Rev. Ian Phillips.