

“The Mapmaker”

Text: Isaiah 43: 1-4; John 15: 4-5; Romans 8:28

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Ancient rabbinic wisdom offers this affirmation: “The shortest distance between a human being and the truth of God is a story.”¹ And so it is today, a single story and some wondering.

There was once a man who was startled from sleep in the middle of the night. It was the kind of waking that found him sitting up, snatched from slumber, and seeing, still in the midst of the dark, something very much of the light. More: It was the kind of waking that caused him to wonder, “Am I really awake, or am I just dreaming to be awake?” To this day and about that wondering only God knows.

In his dream-like-waking the man found himself in a room unlike any he had ever been in before. It was warmly lit with a numinous glow that was just this side of holy. Very quickly he became aware that Someone Else was there with him, Someone who appeared to be laboring over a large map on a drafting table.

“Who are you?” the man curiously asked, to which the Other replied without turning, “I am the Mapmaker.” Puzzled, the man pressed on, “The Mapmaker? What do you make maps of?”

The Other responded, this time with a slight upward glance, “I map out journeys.” The man quickly grew more intrigued, “Journeys of what?” The Mapmaker waved him closer, “Life is a journey for each person. There is never one that is exactly like another. Because of that, I keep maps of people’s lives. Here, look, I am working on yours right now.”

More curious than ever the man looked only to discover with astonishment a map that told the story of his life. From his first day right up to the present moment – all that had been dear to him, all that had been his to know, his times of deep joy and his experiences of anguish and pain, turnings and tossings and wonderings, moments of satisfaction and of suffering – it was all there.

He spoke with wide eyes, “But the map stops with today.” The Mapmaker replied with leading wisdom, “That’s right. I would never map out in advance where an individual will be going, though most times I have a good hunch. Each has the will to freely make choices and decisions. But I stay with those choices, and I keep updated each day on where a person has been.”

The man persisted, “Why do you do this?” And the Mapmaker smiled, “Just in case you might need it.”

“You mean this map is for my benefit?” the man asked in near disbelief. “That’s right. The journey is yours and you take the steps. But you are not alone. I work with you, journey with you. Honestly, I want the best for you; but you make the choices. Lots of people resist such a thought, but it’s the truth.”

The man was nearly speechless in his pondering except to say, “Let me get this straight. You don’t map things out for me, but you follow my choices all along the way. I take the steps and you go along, a companion by my side? You keep a careful eye out and pay attention to my life alone?”

“Well, No and Yes. The ‘No’ part is that I don’t attend to you only. That would put you in a very selfish light, and would make me pretty selective! The ‘Yes’ part, though, is that I do pay attention to you as one of my own. Aware or otherwise, what your life is about and where you find yourself matters to me. Conscious or clueless, I am with you working through and around the choices that you make.”

And with that, as quickly as that dream came it went as well. But because of the visit of the Other, the man would remember, never forget that encounter, even years later, up to this very minute.

That Rabbinic wisdom again: “The shortest distance between a human being and the truth of God is a story.”

Here is the wider truth: Somewhere deep in the heart of life is the infinite diligence and care of One who knows and loves the whole story of who we are. And somewhere also, within each and every one of us, are the resources of the Other empowering us to understand and actualize the full potential of the journeys that we are given.

Let me give you some scriptural moorings to back up so wonderful a dream, because what I have told you is far more than a simple picture in the tossing of someone’s night-time. It’s also a parable of sorts – an earthly tale with a heavenly meaning. It’s filled with solid biblical assumptions and grounded in Christian faith. Theologically, it’s about providence and free-will and God’s sustaining care for us.

The scriptures make any number of statements right at the heart of this. If we hop around from Isaiah to Jeremiah to John – and collect them up in one basket, they assure us of this. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you. I have called you, I gird you, I name you, I will be with you, I love you, apart from me you can do nothing.” That’s about God’s providence, pure as the light of day.

Our gathering prayer this morning was from Psalm 139, beautiful words that declare this magnanimous truth: God knows when we sit down and when we rise up! God is acquainted with all of our ways. God knows our hearts.

More: Another Psalm tells us “the Lord watches over the sojourners.” That’s a good biblical word. Sojourners are those who make the way in faith. And please note: the word is plural, not singular – sojourners, which is to say that the journeyers are many. That’s why community is so essential in the life and development of faith – especially Christian faith. We are on the way together, not alone. And it is together, in relationship with one another, where two or more gather, that the Presence becomes to most vivid.

Proverbs gives this assurance: “A man’s mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” Which is also to say that God *is* with us in ways that we may never fully be aware of – as individuals and as the family of humankind.

And then, my favorite assurance comes in Paul’s words: “All things work together for good to them that love God.” Those words multiply the grounds of encouragement! As if to say, “Go ahead, make your way, I’ll work with you. I’ll be with you. Trust that. You be open to my love, and I’m right there with you.”

Back to the man and his dream. It was an archetypal dream and profoundly life changing. One more fact brings it very close because I am the one who dreamt it! It was a transforming moment along my way that came years ago. And I am yet to this day, never far from its truth. Though its truth, its message speaks far beyond any single life.

Please: Receive all that I have told you in the reverent trust of personal sharing. Receive it in the yearning we all have to be on the Way with God, together. Receive it as we each, alone and together, cobble our way to deeper life and a better world. And receive it in the name and the spirit of the One who is with us, even here, even now, every minute, every hour, every day! Amen!

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¹ Arthur E. Zannoni. Tell Me Your Story. Liturgy Training Publications, 2002, p. 3.