

# “Life’s Global Positioning System, Part 3: Instructions Keep Coming

Exodus 16:2-15

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As we commission our Sunday School teachers this morning, I can’t help but remember so many of my outstanding teachers – both at church and in school. I especially loved my Jr. High teachers – Mrs. Elliott for Sunday School at Community Presbyterian Church in Mt. Prospect; and at Lincoln Jr. High School, Mrs. Rider for English, Mrs. Suzie for Math, and one of my all-time favorites, Mr. Price for Physics. He was cool, he was cute, but most of all, he made physics sound fun. Of all the things he taught me, the one that got through to me the most was this: “Change is constant.” Seems like an oxymoron, right? But at the time – it was 1970 – social turbulence was all I had known. To think that change was normal – even hard-wired into the natural world – I found this greatly reassuring. Change is constant. And so it is.

But there are times when change seems to go into overdrive, and we’re living through one of them now. What’s causing it? I’m convinced that it’s globalization.

As I’ve defined it, globalization occurs whenever previously unconnected peoples are suddenly connected by a new means of communication and/or transportation. These new connections introduce a period of brisk expansion – and with that expansion, massive destabilization. It happened when the ancient Roman road systems went in; it happened when moveable type was invented; and it’s happening today.

In each case, the signs of globalization include

1. a new intersection of people, values, cultures, and ideas;
2. conflicting reactions to these new ideas – embraced by some and feared by others;
3. the unseating of old authorities and the emergence of new powers;
4. and most of all, change: rapid, unpredictable change that produces both anxiety and opportunity.

“Life’s Global Positioning System” is what I’ve called our series – suggesting that the maps that guided us in the past are changing so fast that we can’t print new ones fast enough. We need a global positioning system instead, one that can recalibrate our routes as we go.

Since the ancient Israelites first left Egypt – not knowing where they were headed, but knowing they couldn’t turn back – the people of God have been displaced again and again. In retrospect, we know how the story of the Israelites ends. They end up in the Promised Land and begin a new life as a nation. But they didn’t know that then. Even after they’d escaped the pursuing Egyptian army, it took 40 years before they settled into the Promised Land. In the interim was the wilderness – the long, dry, uncertain time in the wilderness. As we heard in our reading this morning, they were hungry, they were angry, and above all, they were scared.

Though the Israelites’ experience wasn’t really an experience of globalization, it’s a perfect metaphor for living through massive change. You can’t go backward and you don’t see a way forward, which is a terrifying place to be.

We’re not the first to go through this kind of change. Last week I noted that the time of Jesus experienced globalization, courtesy of the paved Roman roads that connected, for the first time, the Western world from Northern France to India and Africa. Cultures mixed and merged, creating new amalgams of ideas and religions. The apostle Paul himself was an educated Jew and also trained in Greek philosophy, and he blended them brilliantly in his marketing of Christianity across the Empire. Christianity would have remained a tiny Jewish sect in virtually any other period of time.

Later, the period of the Renaissance experienced another boom in communications and technological. Scientific discoveries rocked the world, humanist thinking gave freedoms to individuals, and moveable type allowed the dissemination of ideas that the old authorities could not quiet. The Bible was put into the people’s hands for the first time. Out of this upheaval, among

other things, emerged the revolution that we've come to call the Reformation, with its radical notion of "the priesthood of all believers."

Today, we are going through another period of massive change – at a pace the world has never before witnessed. Let's take the four signs of globalization and see what's happening in each:

First, there is a new intersection of people, values, cultures, and ideas. This intersection really began with the advent of railroads and telegraphs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has careened at an ever-faster pace with cars and telephones, airplanes and cell phones and, the mother of all connecting devices, the computer and the Internet. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – which, of course, I found on the World Wide Web – calls this phenomenon "*deterritorialization*": the sense that geographical location is irrelevant to social activities. It's not just commerce, in which "American made" cars contain metal, rubber, and pre-fabbed parts from four continents, or the fact that we no longer even notice that our local grocery store carries wines from New Zealand, South Africa, Argentina, France, Italy, and, oh yes, the U.S. It's also the intersection of cultures and ideas: they careen like pinballs (you remember pinballs? They were popular before "Pacman."). Our exchange student in Zurich, our daughter in Chicago and our nephew in Nashville "talk" constantly on Facebook. The whole world watched the massive show of the power of collectivism beamed from the Olympics, and a month later we watch as tainted formula threatens thousands of Chinese babies. As Stanford's website understatedly puts it, "Territory in the traditional sense of a geographically identifiable location no longer constitutes the ... 'social space' in which human activity takes place (Ruggie, 1993; Scholte, 2000)" (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/globalization/>). Or, in the immortal words of Disney, "It's a small world after all."

That's the first phenomenon: the intersection of people and ideas. Next, we see conflicting reactions to these new ideas – as they're embraced by some and feared by others. This summer at Lambeth, the international Anglican Conference, Christians in Africa faced down American Episcopalians over

homosexuality: for the Americans, an issue of tolerance and Christian acceptance; for the Africans, an unequivocal sin. In France, Muslim women in headscarves are an intolerable affront to the values of equality and freedom, while in Saudi Arabia, the debate over the role of women is being played out in part by teenage girls who do not see what the problem is about text-messaging their boyfriends. In our own country, should Hispanic immigrants be required to speak English, or not? How will dying towns in rural Iowa preserve their identity, even as they welcome a huge influx of immigrants to boost their population? Where and how will our children learn the great Western “canon” of literature and philosophy and even the Bible, now that it’s not the only game in town? Who are we? What’s essential, and what’s not? Where’s the line between xenophobia and patriotism, between tolerance and licentiousness, between the world of new ideas and our cherished traditions? And who gets to decide?

Which leads us to the third consequence of globalization: the unseating of old authorities and the emergence of new powers. It used to be that authority was clear, and, for the most part, it was respected. While there was always room for corruption, unless proven otherwise, politicians, judges, businessmen, physicians, teachers, lawyers, bankers, *pastors*, and others in position of power were admired for their leadership, respected for their education, assumed to behave ethically, and expected to behave in the interest of the common good. That assumption is no longer the case. There are many reasons, but surely they include these: with the speed of communication, there are precious few secrets left; with access to the Internet, there are precious few experts needed; and with everyone able to “blog,” there is precious little hope that any official “news source” can determine the conversation anymore. Here’s an analogy: in the Reformation, moveable type gave Calvin, Luther and others the ability to print tracts and books that defied the church’s teaching, and even the authority of the Pope couldn’t stop them. If that was true then, how much more is going on now. It is the Wild West of ideas, and every single person who has access to email is his or her own publisher.

All of which leads to the fourth, and greatest, change: rapid, unpredictable change that produces both anxiety and opportunity. A vivid example of this has been the financial turmoil of this past week. Thursday morning's *Wall Street Journal* – not prone to hyperbole – put it this way:

“The U.S. financial system resembles a patient in intensive care. The body is trying to fight off a disease that is spreading, and as it does so, the body convulses, settles for a time and then convulses again. The illness seems to be overwhelming the self-healing tendencies of the markets. The doctors in charge are resorting to ever-more invasive treatment, and are now experimenting with remedies that have never before been applied” (Jon Hilsenrath, Serena Ng and Damian Paletta, “Worst Crisis Since 1930s, With No End Yet in Sight,” p. A8).

It's that last part – “experimenting with remedies that have never been applied” – that is one of the key features of globalization. In sector after sector, we are making it up as we go along, which does not exactly inspire confidence. But we don't have much choice in the matter.

There is bound to be intense reaction to this pace of change. I am struck by what Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom presciently said in 2002:

“There is nothing inevitable about the survival of civilizations. The pages of history are littered with the debris of empires that seemed impregnable in their day but soon thereafter fell into decay and oblivion. ... The opportunities posed by global capitalism and the power of technology are vast and potentially benign. They herald the alleviation of poverty, the defeat of ignorance and the treatment of disease on an unprecedented scale. The risks, however, are immense.

“...that the market, left to its own devices, will ... concentrate wealth in fewer and fewer hands, leaving ... significant numbers of people, even within advanced economies, without stable employment, income or

prospects. Envy, anger and the sense of injustice are fertile soil for the growth of protest, violence and terror from which, given the openness on which globalization depends, none of us is immune. The steady erosion of families and communities leaves individuals without networks of support. ... No less urgent is the growing fragmentation of politics, the rise of new forms of tribalism and religious extremism, the persistence of ethnic wars and the capacity of highly decentralized groups, sometimes no more than a few individuals, to put security of life at risk” (*The Dignity of Difference*, pp. 192-3).

I wish I could say he is wrong. But I’m afraid that I have to agree with him.

Change is constant, my teacher said. Change is constant, and when it happens in every single sector of life, it can be overwhelming. I was talking with my sister Karen, who reported that in one day early last week, the day that Lehman brothers fell, she also read that fully 50% of babies in the US are now born to single women: 50%. It was the same day that 70 mile/hour winds from Hurricane Ike reached Ohio – the first time hurricane winds have ever hit that far north. The massive change she’s feeling now is not in her imagination.

So what are we to do? We can start by using our God-given brains to figure this out, and not stick our heads in the sand. We apply ourselves with vigor and strength and the courage appropriate to our faith. This year ahead, in worship and in small group study, is dedicated to the task of strengthening our “Christian Living in a Global Age.” Next week we begin with the basic questions of moral discernment: what does it mean to be good? Or, to use the GPS analogy, what is our moral compass?

And in the meantime, as we face the daunting challenges of our day, we also find great courage in this unwavering, solid truth: we are not alone. We have never been alone. Since the time that the Israelites crossed out of Egypt, the people of God have been blessed with one another, this community of faith, this family of God, and beyond that farther shore, the great cloud of

witnesses and communion of saints that went before us, who by faith faced their trials with dignity and grace. And above all, we remember that our God, who gave us life, is creating still. Like the manna that fell like dew on the ground, the gifts God provides us may not be familiar, and we may not even know what they are. Yet we always are sure that it is God's hand that feeds us ... and that it is God's voice that we hear instructing us: "come, take and eat" ... "I go before you always" ... "come, follow me." And it is God's love that guides us; and he will lead us safely home. Amen.