

I suppose it is a sign of Patricia's age, but while I got a combination of squirrely at the confines and worn out from the talking on the river cruise we took last year, she really liked not having to be changing the rooms we slept in every night or so with the unpacking and repacking that requires. I had always been of the "If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium" school of travel. Stop long enough to take some pictures and mail postcards, but then hop back into the car to see if I could make the Guinness Book of Records for most beds slept in during a two-week vacation; tours and being a follower of tour guides were not for me.

And tours are one of the aspects of cruises such as that we took. While the boat had maybe 140 passengers, when it stopped at a place where a tour was scheduled -- such as to visit windmills, -- we would divide into busloads, each of which would have a local tour guide, and ride to our intended site, during which ride the guide or cruise director would never stop talking. When we would get to wherever the bus was to park, we would gather outside the bus and proceed to be followers of the assigned tour guides. Tour guides, for those who have followed one, often have little flags they hold up so stragglers will be able to follow them.

I suppose it is just my personality, but I prefer *not* to be a follower of someone (I would say, "of *anyone*," but I make a big exception for the guide about whom I want to speak). I still prefer the type of travel where I hop in the car and, with a destination in mind, sort of let the day unwind as it will, stopping for coffee or a coke not on a schedule set by the tour, but by a combination of what along the way strikes me as an interesting place to stop, and by whether or not I want a cup of coffee or a coke at that time!

But even when I travel so independently, I either consult or have previously consulted a map and probably a guide book (this is the like first I ever used). Not only do I have a target destination, but I have a plan for the route I am going to travel. It does not matter where I am or where I am going, I may not be a follower of a tour guide, but there is a plan I will follow. When I did depart from the cruise's tour, I walked to an art museum along a planned route with a map to help me if I had trouble following the plan. Similarly, when I drive from Florence to a Presbyterian church on the Tohono O'odham Indian reservation south of Casa Grande in the middle of the reasonably green Sonoran desert, not only do I follow the route calculated by my cell phone's GPS, but I look ahead of time at the plan I will follow.

So I guess that even if I do not prefer traveling with a cruise and being a follower of its tour guides, I rely upon, I am a follower of, some form of guidance to help me to get to my destinations.

Sort of like life, is it not, this traveling, traveling in the desert of life which last week I tried to suggest is not a desert at all, because we are never alone nor lost nor abandoned, because we always have with us God in the form of the Holy Spirit that comes from and is indeed one with God the Father and Jesus the Son, the same Holy Spirit that drove Jesus into the desert for those forty days that are part of the impetus for the church season known as "Lent."

And in life as in traveling on vacation, whether on a cruise or on one of my how-many-miles-a-day-can-we-cover trips, we benefit not just by being followers of a map or a guide book or GPS, but, well, followers of the right guide.

We Christians have a map and guide book and GPS and that unique guide available to us, though I do not want to get too hung up on drawing one-to-one parallels. We have available to us the teachings of Jesus, and the balance of Scripture, including those sacred Ten Commandments, and we have Jesus himself as our guide; we have plenty of guidance and an incomparable guide of whom to be followers to get us through the desert, through life, and to our heavenly destination. But do we follow that guidance and are we followers of this guide, or are we all like me when stopping my drive for a cup of coffee or a coke, do we simply do as we want at any particular moment, head in any direction we want?

Now, I want to make one thing abundantly clear: I believe we will *all* get to our heavenly destination, and I believe we will get there despite having made some turns that not only were wrong, but which the guidance and guide told us not to take. If I am wrong on this, I shall certainly not get there. But I do believe our guidance and our guide and the Father of our guide are loving and are meant not to threaten us, but to make our journey more joyous, and through us, when we follow the guide, meant to improve the journey for our traveling companions in life as well. In other words, I believe our guidance, God's laws and Jesus' teachings, Jesus himself, are not a road toll we pay or an admission ticket, but rather how-to-books, or guide books for our life journeys.

I say this fairly regularly and said it two weeks ago when discussing a column by David Brooks in which he mentioned the sense of "chosen-ness" within a Jewish religious community; I said that *chosen-ness* means "chosen to receive the Torah," "chosen to be the recipients of God's law," in my terms, "chosen to be the privileged recipients *and transmitters to the world* of God's guidebook for living at peace and in joy with others of God's children" . . . for living at peace and in joy with others of God's children *if we are its followers!*

The value of that guidebook is not just to help us on *our* journey, it is also to benefit and even to guide the others with whom we share that journey, whether or not they ever consult that guidance or believe in our guide.

And it is not guidance to be followed nor a guide of whom to be followers only when we are lost, or only when we are in an environment where it seems appropriate to follow. He is a guide of whom we need be followers at every moment. My fellow Lord-I-want-to-be-a-Christians, for us there is no *religious* world that exists separately from the rest of the world God made; we cannot divorce ourselves from God's guidance because we are engaged in secular -- that is, "outside the church" — we cannot divorce ourselves from God's guidance because we are engaged in secular activity. If God's guidance is good for our travels, it is good for every stage of our travels, and that is not always easy, as Jesus himself indicated to his

followers: being followers can involve picking up our crosses and accepting challenges we would rather avoid.

Two months ago, my comments in the church newsletter, excellently edited by Denise and Larry Kollert, concerned the difficulty for us Christians of dealing with the horrors inflicted by a Taliban/Al Qaeda related group in Pakistan that murdered 132 school children; more recently, I have recommended to you an article in "The Atlantic" that you can find online entitled, "What ISIS Wants." But I believe that our guidance and the guide of whom we are followers say that I should *not* jump from concern with these horrors and a determination that they must be stopped to declaring that anyone who follows Islam is bad. The guidance and guide also do not say that I should demand from the pulpit some form of action from the President -- I have not received Bill O'Reilly's e-mail, and I generally do enjoy listening to Bill O'Reilly on my car's satellite radio while driving home or around this presbytery -- the guide does not say that I should demand from the pulpit some form of action from the President. Nor does my being a follower of the same guide as Franklin Graham say that, while I sincerely bow to Graham's superior piety and sense of mission, that I must join Graham in condemning the religion of Islam because ISIS claims to follow it. I do not condemn it; the only Iman whom I have met *did* (and if he still lives, I am sure does still) preach peace. Bombers of abortion clinics have, while injuring people, claimed that they are following Christianity; should I thus condemn Christianity? People can follow extracts from our Bible and claim to be Christian while killing male homosexuals -- or remarried divorce people, -- support for both of which can be found in Scripture, indeed it can, but that does not mean Christianity actually advocates such killing and is not a religion that seeks peace.

I cannot do these things because it is not consistent with being a follower of the guidance, the heart of the guidance, which I receive in the Scriptures. But how, you might ask, is it acceptable that I -- or you -- would take issue with guidance that can be gleaned from that Scripture?

The answer, I think, is simple: because the guide of whom I want to be a follower tells me otherwise. He tells me, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . ." [Matthew 5:43-44]

It is not always easy! I do not "hate" anyone, but I hate the evil that is acted out by ISIS and know of no way other than through the horror of . . . and this pains me . . . than through the horror of killing many of them that their evil can be stopped. That is terrible! It is terrible because my guide still sees them as children of God, and so must I.

I guess what I am saying is this. I can do a good job of traveling the country, seaside, mountains, plains and desert, a good job even of traveling Europe or Latin America, with the guidance only of a map and guidebook or GPS without being a follower or any tour guide, but for life I need the equivalent of those sometimes too talkative tour guides with their flags. I need Jesus, I need to look at the cross, not a flag, and I know that I will travel best in a world, travel best through this life that often confronts us with the

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horrendous concept of the "lesser of two evils," if I appeal to this guide. I may still make some wrong turns, but if I listen to this guide, those who travel with me will be more joyous in the end.

We are all fellow travelers; sometimes others help carry our baggage, but sometimes we need to help others carry theirs, and hope they will follow the right path. If we are sincere in our faith, we should hope they arrive at the same destination as do we.

Amen.