

When Things Don't Go as Planned

A part of the sermon series "Along the Way: Reflections from the Camino"

Preached by Rev. Ridgley Beckett on August 24, 2025

Exodus 16:1-7a

Our summer sermon series this year is called "Along the Way" and is following my journey while I was on sabbatical this winter on El Camino de Santiago—in English, The Way of St. James. Most pilgrims walk a Camino, but I traveled by bike over 200km from Porto, Portugal to Santiago de Compostela, Spain. If you're joining in now and unsure what a "Camino" is—it is a pilgrimage one makes to a city in the northwest corner of Spain in Galicia to pay homage to the remains of the Apostle James, who was believed to be responsible for the spread of Christianity to the Iberian Peninsula. There are a framework of medieval trails that all lead to the same place—this cathedral in Santiago de Compostela. Over the years *why* people do a Camino has changed, but there is one thing for sure: God is all over the place on these trails.

My first day on the Camino was spent getting acclimated and comfortable with the idea that I had committed to journeying on my bike in a foreign country alone. After a near accident, I found myself searching for respite and discovered many locked up churches along a route that was known for religious spaces for rest. Instead, where I found God was in the care of 3 volunteer 'hospitaleros' in a pilgrim hostel who had done a Camino themselves. I was greeted warmly, tended to, fed and welcomed with radical hospitality that reminded me I was just where I needed to be and that God had set me on this sacred trail for a reason.

At end of my first day, I found myself wandering around the ancient medieval town of Barcelos, in northern Portugal where colorful rooster statues and murals are prominent. A popular Portuguese legend originated in Barcelos that tells of a pilgrim who was wrongly accused of a crime who, upon being sentenced to death, declared that the roasted rooster on the judge's table would crow as proof of his innocence. Miraculously, the rooster did crow at the moment of execution, saving the man's life. The Rooster of Barcelos has become a national symbol of Portugal, representing justice, faith, and good luck.

However, this Rooster didn't help my luck that night. With nightfall came a storm system that ravaged the town. It POURED all night. Every time I heard the rain pitter patter on the windows, I checked the forecast. It was as if I had

convinced myself that checking it more would make it miraculously head in a different direction. High Winds, Heavy Rain.

At 5am, I awoke to a whatsapp message from my guide who had planned the trip itinerary for me saying that it was not safe to ride in these conditions. He arranged for the luggage transport to drive me to the next city with my bike. I begrudgingly went down to breakfast that morning and sat in a quiet dining area. I sighed deeply. It was a gloomy day and I was beyond disappointed.

I felt like I was in the wrong place, like I was just another tourist. I should be out on the Camino. This isn't a 'tour' for me—it was a pilgrimage. What pilgrimage takes an SUV down the highway to the next hotel? I yearned for the peace of the Camino that I had a small taste of on day one.

I arrived in Ponte de Lima at 11am. I was too early for check-in so I dropped my items at the hotel and decided to explore the city. *Except I couldn't.* It was SO windy that any time I opened my umbrella it immediately flipped inside out. I walked sideways with my umbrella across this medieval bridge into the oldest city in Portugal... that was flooding. The riverfront looked angry, the poles waved in the wind like they weren't sturdy at all. I weaved in and out of alleys avoiding the wind and rain, soaking myself as I juttet from closed storefront to closed storefront. *Nothing was open yet, I was soaked, and not where I was supposed to be.* I slipped into a church, looking once more for the stamp for my pilgrim passport and found nothing again. I sat on the pew, looked up at the cross and started crying. **WHAT IS HAPPENING?!**

A rush of anger and frustration released and I got honest with God. I came here for a Camino, the churches are locked, I can't find stamps, I'm not even DOING IT and nothing is what people are saying it is! **What is the purpose of all of this?**

The weather matched my self-pity loop I had fallen into. After taking a moment to breathe deeply and calm down, I journaled my *many* feelings. After wiping some tears and a phone call to a friend, I decided to make the best of it and embark out in the sideways rain once more to have lunch at a local restaurant. After lunch I gave into the rain and just walked sullenly back to the hotel, no umbrella, soaked to the bone. I walked into my hotel and it was dark, quiet and drafty. The front desk attendant told me that the power was going in and out from the wind and that my luggage was in my room.

Great.

That afternoon, I sat by a window using the grey overcast sky to light up the pages of my book, just watching the clock, waiting for bed. The lights would flicker every 40 minutes or so and then go right back out again. In one of those moments with power, I loaded the weather app and discovered it wasn't just a rainy day in Ponte De Lima—there was a tropical storm hitting the coast of Portugal, and I was in the thick of it. It would be raining for the remainder of my Camino. I focused on being grateful for a roof over my head and that I had not been on the trail that day.

By nightfall I had received a message from my guide recommending that I ride with the transport again the next day. The anger and frustration returned. Of course, the one time I COME AND DO THIS there's a tropical storm! I video messaged a friend tearfully. He looked at me and said—Ridgley, you're one of the most stubborn, resilient people I know. This sucks right now, yes. But you're the only person I know that would weather something like this and come out on the other end with a sermon about it.

And that was just what I needed to hear. I took a deep breath and made a plan. I decided to wake up at 4:30am, check the weather, and decide *then* if I would take the transport. If the wind was mild enough, I was going to rough it. I made a plan for keeping myself as dry as possible on the trail the next day, plastic bags on my feet and all. It wouldn't be luxurious, but I'd do it. That night I rested soundly.

When morning came, I was surprised to see the rain had subsided for a bit. The worst of the rain would return in the afternoon. I got dressed, packed up, ate a peanut butter sandwich and got on my bike as the sun was rising. I took a glimpse at the bridge that had given me so much grief the day before and thought, "here goes nothing, bom Camino, Ridge." I began day three with tenacity and pedaled past my first yellow shell sign.

I couldn't believe it—it was windy but no hard sideways rain. I started to believe that this was going to happen—until I turned the corner on to a path that was flooded for as far as my eyes could see. Portuguese road workers looked at me like I was crazy, spoke quickly to me like I understood and pointed down the road. As I traveled, I saw another sign with a shell that said "Provisional route".

I turned down the new path, perhaps about as muddy as the first day and quickly pedaled, giving into the fact that being wet and muddy was my new

normal. It was dicey and every turn was a new chance to navigate around flooded trails, but none as bad as the first one. And every time I met flooding, I found a way around it using these signs saying “provisional route.”

By 9am, I was in the woods witnessing the strongest rushing stream I had ever seen alongside the path. My adrenaline pushed me further.

Later that morning, I pushed my bike up a steep rocky hill and at the top I was met by... PAVEMENT! At long last PAVEMENT! I hopped back up on my bike and followed signs to the foot of the biggest climb of my entire Camino-Labruja. It was so steep that I felt like I was climbing up into the storm clouds. I had conquered so much to get there and there was ***nothing*** stopping me now from getting up this hill.

With each pedal stroke, I grew more and more confident. At the top I popped up out of the saddle cheering as I flew down the mountain. At the bottom, I stopped and took a moment to breathe and have a snack. I pulled out my phone and texted my guide. ‘no transport, I’ll see him in Valencia!’

I smiled and looked up and saw the most beautiful fields and rolling hills to my right—the tall grass and ancient rock walls were glittered with...SUNLIGHT. Just through the clouds, I saw the sun for the first time in over 24 hours. The sun had greeted me in the moment I needed it most. Somehow, in the middle of a tropical storm, I had avoided the heaviest rain and safely navigated most of my next leg. Pavement, sunlight, provisional routes...how lucky could I be? Suddenly, I started to understand the bizarre “luck” of that Barcelos rooster.

The anger and frustration of that day before seemed a distant memory. I was soaked, but I was as happy as a clam. I pedaled through Camino checkpoints, reading people’s stories, seeing all the things I longed to see the day before. I even had the chance to meet some fellow pilgrims on the way for the first time. It was truly a gift.

I arrived at my next hotel in Valencia just as it started raining. They let me check in early to my hotel and dry off. I peaked out my window, saw the dark clouds coming across the countryside and suddenly, it started HAILING. Through the hail, I saw SPAIN in the distance, ***I did it.***

That afternoon, I sat in a coffee shop eating warm soup, watching the rain thinking about my day and the many ‘provisional’ route signs I saw. It turns out

that people before me had also encountered hardship on their Caminos, and, along the way, they discovered new routes to the next village.

With God's provision, the support of those gone before me, and my friends from home, I had done it. I got through another day on the Camino and discovered exactly what the famous phrase on the Camino means—***“The Camino may not go the way you’ve hoped, but it always goes the way it is supposed to go”***

That day was a turning point for me—it wasn't just about getting to Spain anymore, it was about how God was forming me along the way. I began to shift my focus from control (making plans) to surrender and trust (God meeting me along the way, even amid a detour). Even when everything fell apart, day two had a purpose for my Camino.

Our scripture reading this morning tells about a people on a journey—the Israelites in the wilderness with Moses. They had taken a chance, took their families and their belongings and followed this man and God. They set out from Egypt expecting freedom to feel like triumph. But in the wilderness, it didn't feel like triumph. It felt like hunger. It felt like fear. It felt like things weren't going as planned. “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt!” they cried out. “At least there we had bread to eat.”

God had provided for them, but they still doubted God's provision. In self-pity, anger and frustration, they lashed out at Moses—YOU BROUGHT US OUT HERE TO STARVE? Surely, we'll die.

And yet, despite their doubts and whining, God continued to provide for them, giving them manna and water from a rock, showing them a way forward with a cloud. What looked like a failed plan became the very place where God's care was revealed. God provides for us right under our noses even amid complaints, catastrophic thinking and anger.

Just as God provided manna, provisional routes, and community for the Israelites... God provides for us. When things don't go as planned, it is so easy to resign ourselves to feelings of frustration and anger. We so badly want to *control* outcomes and sometimes fool ourselves into thinking that we can be in charge of how things unfold in our lives.

But time and time again, we are humbled by life's twists and turns. In those times, we can remember that while it is plenty disappointing, God provides

provision in signs all around us, in the people who lift us up, in the strangers who point to a new path, and the resiliency God gives us to endure. God's provision meets us where we are. Our journey may not go as planned, but in God's hands, it always goes as it is supposed to go.

So when your path floods, or when the storm rolls in, remember this: the God of manna and provisional routes is with you, too.

And maybe, just maybe, those moments will make for a good sermon.