

The Awakened Traveler: Leaving Home

Exodus 13:17-21

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July 17, 2022

About a week ago, I sent Emmett off on a summer research trip to Iceland. Although I felt some of the usual parental pangs of worry and a bit of sadness to see them go, mostly I was just so happy and excited for them! This is the kind of experience I had hoped they would have in college, but with the arrival of Covid in their sophomore year, it didn't look likely to happen. They were supposed to go to Iceland in the summer of 2020 and, of course, the trip was canceled. Then, they were hoping to go in 2021 and again the trip was canceled. Since they graduated this spring, we thought they had lost their opportunity until the college decided to allow this year's seniors to participate even after graduation. I am so grateful for them to experience being immersed in another culture, surrounded by a different language, and engaged in seeing the world through a different lens.

As I talk with people and scroll through my Facebook feed, I get the impression that a lot of people are beginning to travel again. After more than two years of being very cautious about leaving home, vaccinations, and treatments for Covid have helped us feel more confident about adventuring out into the world a bit more. I believe that, especially in this time of social unrest and division, being exposed to new places, people, and cultures is one of the healthiest things for us - and for our spiritual growth.

As Christ-followers, we are called to a deeper understanding of God's diverse peoples and a deeper connection with God, humanity, and Creation. We are also called to be God's peacemakers in the world. Travel provides us with experiences to grow in understanding and empathy and opportunities to be people who offer compassion and peace. And so this summer, in our summer sermon series "The Awakened Traveler, we are going to explore how, whether it is in a trip abroad or in the pages of a book, God shapes and transforms us, and through us, the world, with the spiritual practice that is travel.

Rick Steves, the well-loved travel writer, is a Christ-follower as well as an adventurer. He has experienced himself how travel becomes a spiritual experience. In one of his website videos, he says, "By traveling thoughtfully, we connect - even for those of us for whom travel can only be a state of mind... Travel is candid, honest, being in the moment. In a world hungry for authenticity, we yearn for connection. Travel frees us from routine; it creates room for serendipity. Serendipity leads to connections. Travel forces us to bend, and to flex. It makes us more tolerant and inspires us to celebrate diversity. The world opens wide with a montage of wonders and lessons learned - the celebration of difference and oneness at the same time. We learn that love is love in their home as it is in mine. Through travel we see a world filled with joy, with compassion, and with good people. We learn that we all share the same world, and we all share the same window of time."

Yet, leaving what is comfortable and familiar can be frightening and challenging. Whether it is leaving on a trip or taking a new job or moving to a new place. Whether it is a physical leave-taking or the decision to leave behind an old habit or way of viewing the world. We all know change is hard and we can easily fall into worry and anxiety. So, the first step in

embarking on the journey is simply getting out the door. What do we need to put ourselves in the right mindset to get the most out of our travels? How do we approach the journey with an openness to discovery rather than with our hearts and minds closed by fear?

Perhaps the greatest travel story in scripture is the forty-year journey of the people of Israel on their way to the promised land. You may remember that they were slaves in Egypt when God called Moses to lead them out of captivity and to the land of Canaan, the home God had promised them. Now, these were not people who were without fear and anxiety. In fact, more than once when things got tough, they would say they would rather go back to Egypt and be slaves than continue their journey. But, in their story, we also find glimpses of what we might call a traveler's mindset - a way of engaging the journey that quells the anxiety and opens us to receive what God has for us to learn as we venture to new places.

In the passage from Exodus that we heard a few minutes ago, we learn that as they embark on their journey, God does not lead them toward Canaan on the most direct path. The direct route would take them through the land of the Philistines and likely lead to war. So, God leads them through the wilderness instead - a route that is safer but also much, much longer.

When I was a kid and my mom and I would drive from my hometown of Albion to some neighboring town to go shopping or run errands, Mom almost never took the expressway. Rather, she drove the "scenic route" - the back roads through the countryside. As a teenager, this made me crazy. Why not just get there as fast as we could? Why not just take the easy way? I never got much of an answer from mom about that, but now, as a mother myself, I can see a lot of reasons why she may have made that choice. She may have just felt more comfortable driving the back roads. Or maybe she knew that the longer route would give us more time to talk in that way that kids and parents seem to do in the car if nowhere else. Or maybe she just wanted to soak up the beauty of the countryside and hoped I would, too. Taking the longer, slower path, provides more time to appreciate the world around us and more opportunities for serendipity. How many foxes and deer, stunning fall colors and roadside wildflowers did we see on the country roads between Albion and Battle Creek that we would surely have missed had we taken I-94?

So, perhaps one aspect of a traveler's mindset is to be open to the journey however it unfolds. We cause ourselves so much stress and anxiety when we focus on speed and efficiency. Yet, traveling often brings circumstances outside of our control. What if, instead of worrying when a flight is late or our itinerary has to change, we use those circumstances to experience what God has to show us right where we are, in that moment, surrounded by the people who cross our path? What if we simply stay open to the journey?

Today's scripture goes on to say that Moses took the bones of their ancestor, Joseph, with them on the journey. This was at Joseph's request, many years before. He had asked that, if the people of Israel ever left Egypt, they would take his bones with them.

Now, I'm trying to imagine this. You are packing up what little you can take with you as you escape from slavery, knowing Egyptian soldiers will be right on your heels, when you remember you need to take your ancestor's bones. You know how it is to travel with more luggage than you can really manage. It must have felt rather awkward and cumbersome crossing the red sea with an extra bag or two of bones along for the ride. What did the people think about

those bones? Did they seem like an inconvenience? Were they a burden from the past or a source of comfort for the future?

What are the bones we carry with us when we travel? We all carry our own stories, the stories of our ancestors, the stories we have been taught. Sometimes, those stories are pivotal to our identities and ground us in who we are. Yet, sometimes they also limit our worldview. If we have been taught that people of European descent are superior to those of African descent, that story will shape how we engage others as we travel. If we have been taught that travel is dangerous or risky, that story will cause us to limit what we do and the opportunities we take advantage of on the journey. So, perhaps a second aspect of leaving on the journey with a traveler's mindset is to question the assumptions we make about the people and places where we travel, recognizing they are like heavy baggage that slows us down and interferes with what God has for us to learn on the journey.

There is one other lesson for us in these early verses about the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. God is always with them. God leads them - a pillar of cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night. When we travel, whether it is across the country or around the world, into a new part of our community or through the words in a book, we can take assurance and comfort in knowing that God is with us. Whatever awkward situations we might find ourselves in. Whatever suddenly makes us feel uncomfortable or ill-at-ease. Whenever we need courage and strength. God is there. We can ground ourselves and draw strength from knowing that the Creator of all things and the great source of love is right with us. The knowledge of God's presence also reminds us to view the people we meet and the places we go as God views them - through the eyes of compassion and kindness, curiosity and joy.

And so, I will end with this prayer from Saint Patrick, who traveled widely as a missionary in Ireland.

*I arise today
Through God's strength to pilot me;
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's hosts to save me
Afar and anear,
Alone or in a multitude.*

May it be so. Amen.