

The Journey is our Home

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Selections from Genesis 12-35
Matthew 28:16-20

One of the wonderful skits from the church retreat talent show last weekend was the youth group skit "Mennonite YOUR Way." The youth were bikers — Fang, Steel and Thor — riding their bicycles across the country and saving money by staying with various Mennonite families.

This whole Mennonite thing was new to these young people, and confusing as they made their way from Goessel, Kansas, to Lancaster, Pa., to Washington, D.C. But as they tasted pepper nuts and shoo fly pie, were invited to have their feet washed and learned to play Dutch Blitz, they began to appreciate what it means to be Mennonite. Their appreciation grew so much that they wanted to join Hyattsville Mennonite Church, and they wrote their own faith statement to one of our beloved songs. This is just an excerpt.

*We are pilgrims on a journey,
we are travelers on the road,
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load. HWB 307*

We are bikers on a road trip
been to Kansas and PA
met the Mennos and their couches
via Mennonite your way.

We have seen the many Mennos
all over the USA
We have come to Hyattsville
and hope you will accept us today.

The youth tapped into something that Dawn Ruth Nelson addresses in her new book, *A Mennonite Woman: Exploring Spiritual Life and Identity*. Dawn notes that Mennonites are part of a shift in spirituality. Like many others we are moving from a spirituality of “dwelling to seeking” from “place to pilgrimage.” (Nelson quotes Robert Wuthnow here.)

This may be related to the fact that we are no longer as tied to the land as we once were. We are not farmers with a schedule that ties us to the planting and harvesting seasons, the internal clocks of cows or body rhythms of chickens. Now we think nothing of traveling over multiple time zones across the world. We talk to people across the globe by phone or Internet, commute by planes, trains and automobiles. We are pilgrims on a journey. We are travelers on the road.

The metaphors we use to describe our faith are telling. Mennonites used to be called “the quiet in the land.” We sang songs that said, “This world is not my home,” though we had a destination in mind. We had “catechism classes” for 12-year-olds so that they could begin the work of being faithful and learning the answers. They were expected to bloom where they were planted. We looked longingly “just over in the glory land.” We lived a quiet faith, committed to the land we lived and worked on, but always with an eye toward a better land, not in this life but the next.

In this congregation, we can hardly be accused of being quiet. Last week during worship at retreat we sang, quite loudly, “How can we be silent?” We have a “seekers” class for high school students and adults where we encourage each other to ask faith questions. We are a “destination congregation.” When the kids

ask “are we there yet?” they aren’t asking about heaven. People drive 25 miles from almost any direction to worship with this group. We are definitely on the road and if we are looking to heaven, we are active in our search, not passive in our waiting.

As Mennonites, we are not unique in our transition from dwelling to seeking, from place to pilgrimage. But is this a departure from our roots or a return to our original faith story? Our collective story, as we read it in the Bible, is one of journeying. Once we left the Garden of Eden, we were on the road. Listen to this collection of verses from Genesis.

Gen 12:1-3 YHWH said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and the home of your parents, and go to a place I will show you. I will make of you a great people. I will bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you. And all the people on the face of the earth will be blessed through you.”

Gen 13: 1 So Sarai and Abram left Egypt with their possessions and Lot went with them.

Gen 20: 1 Eventually Sarah and Abraham moved on from there to the Negev and settled between Kadesh and Shur at a place called Gerar.

Gen 26:17-18 So Rebecca and Isaac left and settled in the valley of Gerar. Their workers reopened the wells that had been dug there in the time of Abraham, which the Philistines filled after Abraham died, and he restored their original names.

Gen 28:10-11 Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he passed the night there. He took a rock and used it for a headrest and lay down to sleep there.

Gen 29:1 Jacob continued his journey and headed to the land of the eastern tribes.

Gen 35:1 God said to Jacob, "Go now up to Bethel and settle there. When you get there, build an altar to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau."

These are only a smattering of verses but it is clear that Abraham and Sarah and their descendents were dependent on God to give them direction, to help them find the right land and the right spouses. God told them when to stop, when to go, when to build an altar, when and where to cross the river. God's people listened and they received a response or some kind of indication that they were to move here or there. Sometimes they even ended up back in the land of their ancestors.

(While we may think of ourselves as spiritual pilgrims, it is not the same thing as seeking asylum because of political or religious persecution. Or having to move house because of the foreclosure crisis, or being homeless because of addiction or mental illness. These are things we work to alleviate as part of our journey.)

Sometimes when I am driving my children hither and yon, sometimes very yon, I wonder how I got to this point in my life. Is my driving 40 miles a day within an 8 mile radius an indication of my pilgrim faith or my out-of-control life and

massive carbon footprint? Am I really on a journey, or am I wandering in circles like the children of Israel did for 40 years in the desert?

What does it mean to our faith — to imagine that we are seeking, that we are pilgrims, not dwellers in the land attached to a place?

While the idea of journeying is part of the beginning of our story, from Genesis, as Anabaptists of course we look to Jesus as our model. We don't have a lot of details about his personal life. We know he had good friends, that he prayed, that he was an itinerant teacher, healer and preacher. He didn't seem to spend a lot of time in one place. The journey was definitely his home, at least during his 3-year ministry. According to Matthew's gospel, Jesus instructed his disciples to keep on the move.

Matthew 28: ¹⁶Now the 11 disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

This familiar passage is usually highlighted for the resurrection of Jesus, the Trinitarian baptismal formula or the Great Commission. The perceived emphasis on proselytizing may make some of us uncomfortable. But let's give it one more chance.

What if this is another part of Jesus' invitation to the journey? When the women meet Jesus at the tomb after his resurrection he says, "Go, tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they will see me." That has the disciples on the road, as it is at least 50 miles from Jerusalem to Galilee. In Luke, the disciples meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection. In Matthew, where mountains figure prominently, the disciples travel to Galilee where they hope to meet him. Perhaps they are headed back to the very mount where that important sermon was preached.

Upon reaching the mountain, the disciples see Jesus, worship him and some doubt. They have come all this way, seeking the risen Christ. Matthew says, "*When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.*"

What did they doubt? That Jesus was really there? That he was resurrected? Did they doubt what he said? Whatever their doubt they, still show up. They are still seeking. They are still trying to understand what Jesus is all about. Jesus doesn't accuse them of doubting, he doesn't blame or ridicule them. He just gives directions and reminds them that he will always be with them.

He gives instructions to doubters and believers alike: go make disciples and teach them as I taught you — the parables, the healing, the Sermon on the Mount, the new understanding of the commandments. They are to hit the road again. Going home and hunkering down is not part of the directives.

Is there a word for us here, we who are travelers on the road?

When we were more stationary — dwellers in the land — our lives and faith we were formed by the community around us. We had a community rhythm;

we had ways that we listened and learned from each other and from God. The daily and weekly rhythms of life may have included devotions and prayer meetings, maybe Wednesday night Bible study, winter or summer Bible school. For some Mennonites, part of spiritual life was dressing plainly and making sure others in the community did too.

But now we are a dispersed community, with a lot of other influences besides the Body of Christ. The point of the journey is to allow it to form us. This is where we listen for the voice of God. The journey helps to shape how we follow in Jesus' footsteps.

This will be personal rather than communal so it will look different for different people. For some perhaps it will be Bible reading or journaling. For others it may be silent meditation. It may be dedication to walking, running, biking, swimming with an ear toward God. It may be a commitment to connection with the natural world or noticing how we see God present in our children.

The method is not important. What is important is our commitment to the journey and seeking together to be formed in Christ's image.

So, where do we find ourselves? As disciples we have heard of the risen Christ. Are we seeking? Perhaps some of us are still on the road to Galilee and have not yet met Jesus on the mountain. Perhaps some of us made it to the mountain, but we still have our doubts. Some of us may be ready to hear, "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*" I hope all of us can hear, "*Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

To be a spiritual seeker is not uncommon these days. What is unusual is to be a spiritual seeker within a religious tradition, committed to a group of people who are also seeking. This is the life of the disciples, on the road together, wondering what they will find at the top of that mountain. This is the path of Anabaptists, seeking and affirming together.

As we come back down the mountain, let us listen with Abraham and Sarah, with Jacob, Rachel and Leah for God's leading. As we live in the light of the risen Christ, perhaps still filled with doubt, let us walk and work together like the disciples. And let us always remember that we are not alone. We have each other and Christ is with us until the end of the age.