

Three Journeys on the Way

The First Reflection (the Familiar Journey)

If you had been watching the TransCanada Highway in August of 2015, you might have noticed a small group of 10 Anishinabe walkers leave from Eagle Lake First Nation, heading towards Kenora. Each day they were led by a woman holding a copper kettle of water. Beside her walked a man holding a staff, curved at the end, designed with red cloth and eagle feathers. Different people took those two roles, and others joined them, in a rotating cast of friends. In the evenings they would gather to pray, pouring the water out into a nearby stream or pond, and in the mornings they would gather the water again, and resume the journey.

Each day as they travelled the kettle of water would continue moving steadily, handed off from one woman to another, the staff travelling beside it in the same way.

Now if you had been watching on one of those mornings, just before lunch, you might have seen a west-bound car with Winnipeg license plates pull over on the side of the road. Out leaps a white man in his late twenties, red cap on his head, empty hands. ‘It’s Petah!’ greeted one of the walkers. And they beckoned me over, put the Eagle Staff in my hands, and said ‘start walking!’

My friends in the car promised to drop my bags at the camp, and I was suddenly walking along the TransCanada, holding what I assumed correctly was a ceremonially significant object, suddenly part of the Water Walk group by virtue of having arrived right when they needed someone to carry the staff. Before I knew it I was **On the Way**.

This summer we’ll be hearing many people speak on the theme ‘On the Way: Views from Our Faith Journey’. It’s very natural to talk about faith as a journey. A journey implies a place of origin, an activity leading to progression towards a destination. A journey has moments where you decide the path you’ll take, moments where you pause to admire the view, moments where the road fails you and you doubt that you will ever arrive. Journeys take us out of comfort and into discomfort, into new places, sometimes into peril, homesickness, heartache and loss. And anyone else who bikes to church will agree with me.

When we describe our faith as a journey, these are things we assume – that faith is going from one place to another, that it is an effort, that it is easier with a guide, a map, and travelling companions.

And sometimes, the journey sweeps you along. Someone puts the staff in your hand and says ‘start walking’. Someone kicks in your door and says ‘start walking’. Not all journeys are equal. Not all journeys are chosen. And sometimes ‘journey’ is not a good metaphor. Sometimes it’s more important to celebrate the present.

A trans friend once told me how he knows that the question is coming – a certain tilt of the head, a composed expression of caring, and little head bobs – ‘so... tell me about your journey’. Why is that person more interested in hearing about the past than about the person standing in front of them? It’s not wrong to be curious, but journeys take many forms.

When I look back at my life’s journey of faith, I see twists and turns, but mostly a consistent journey. How is it for you? When you look back is there a solid line of footprints stretching back to the horizon?

What about journeys that have been interrupted, disrupted, indefinitely postponed? I wonder about the lives of people who have endured interruption. Years of waiting in a refugee camp. Years incarcerated in the prison system. Years spent dealing with trauma. Is there a better metaphor than journey to use for faith in these cases?

How does this metaphor work for you? Do you have a metaphor for your faith other than a journey? Come and tell me, afterwards, these are fruitful conversations to have.

For me, whether I like it or not, ‘journey’ is almost inseparable from faith. The metaphor is woven throughout Christianity. Before Christians were Christians we were called Followers of the Way. The Way of Jesus. This church uses the name ‘On the Way Cafe’ for the part of its Christian Education program which is designed for adults. We are each on a journey, and for a time our paths are together, and we come together in a cafe by the side of the road to share stories, to receive encouragement, and to learn more about the Way that we are on.

I want to talk about three types of journey and how they appear in Scripture.

The first is **the familiar journey**, the daily commute, doing the rounds. This is the known journey that herders and their families take each year to bring their flocks to fresh pastures, like Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, and their descendants. ‘Our forefather was a wandering Aramean’ – mostly trying to avoid the Imperial dangers of kings and cities. This is the journey at festival time, bringing offerings to the temple, and reconnecting with the larger family. This journey is the adventure of the everyday, the changes of land and season, and the presence of God amongst friends and family.

The most striking part of the scripture reading we had today is the way that Jesus calls people onto an entirely different journey. It's troubling and uncomfortable.

Jesus said to another man, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

This is a shocking statement. No one is going to include it in their calendar of inspirational Jesus quotes. But this outrageous demand it offers us some truth. It helps bring to the surface how we feel about our familiar journeys, our routine, our respectable comfort.

We do not easily allow our comfort to be disrupted. But sometimes it is a necessity. When it means survival, there are situations where you do not bury the dead. Where you do not go back and say goodbye to your family. That is what Jesus is facing. Something so important, so essential and terrible, that it means leaving the familiar and undertaking the second type of journey. We'll speak about the second type of journey soon.

Let us thank God for the familiar journey, for our companions in family and faith community. Let's give thanks for the capacity to build and experience life in safety. Let us always seek to build relationships to support one another.

The Second Reflection (Journey into the Unknown)

In the Lord of the Rings, Frodo Baggins is thrust into adventure when he learns that the magic ring he inherited is in fact the most dangerous item in all of Middleearth. He agrees to risk the journey to take the ring to the council of the wise and powerful, who decide how to destroy it. But the council is riven with argument, ambition, and indecision. Facing the terrifying danger, he again stands, uncertain: "I will take the Ring to Mordor, though I do not know the way"

The second journey that I see in the Bible is the **Journey into the Unknown**, into danger, the pilgrimage. Mythology teaches us that the nature of the Hero's Journey is a quest to benefit the community or restore order. And the Bible repeatedly reminds us that this is not an exciting adventure of learning and discovery, but a last resort, undertaken by reluctant and flawed people.

We are most familiar with the Journey into the Unknown today because we see it being resisted. This is the journey that exiled people take, formerly enslaved people, people seeking refuge. Today we see this journey to safety being interrupted around the world, as people are

incarcerated in concentration camps and held by border walls and those who enforce them. It is important to recognise that these are the same sacred journeys that we read in scripture.

It is the journey of the Hebrew people leaving slavery in Egypt, and their descendants being taken into Exile in Babylon. It is the journey of Elijah, trying to survive the violence of a hostile state. This is what the prophet Jonah feared when God told him to go to Ninevah and tell the people to repent from their evil. And it is the risk that Esther takes when she advocates for her people's safety. This is the journey of every prophet, to the place where power dwells. Jesus is on this journey, heading for Jerusalem.

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.

Like the familiar journey, the journey into the unknown is not inherently bad. It is bad only because it is resisted, it is difficult, it is necessary. In that way, it helps us understand the Way of Jesus which is also difficult, necessary, and resisted. In our scripture, Jesus is not welcomed by the Samaritans. They know that he is going to Jerusalem, to the temple. Since the Samaritans believe that God can only be worshipped their different mountain, they assume that this group is going to worship in Jerusalem, and refuse to offer hospitality.

When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"

James and John seem to think that this village is an obstacle that they need to conquer, but Jesus is focused. He rebukes them and they find another place to stay. We see that Jesus is focused, resolute. He has run out of time to explain things, to teach. James and John know that this journey is important, but they don't understand why. Destroying obstacles is not the point, getting to Jerusalem is the goal. **Even though they are literally following Jesus, it is easy for them to stray from the Way.**

I came to Turtle Island nine years ago to work with the Christian Peacemaker Teams in partnership with Indigenous nations who were struggling for their rights to land, language, and life. In those days, Christian Peacemaker Teams had a motto 'Getting in the Way'. And we had an illustration of two feet in dark sandals, stepping on strings of barbed wire.

This motto had a few different meanings. The first was simple – ‘Getting in the Way’ of violence, by physically intervening or blocking the people who sought to do violence. One of the core principles of CPT was that we believed in peace and we were willing to risk the same for peace that soldiers and armies are willing to risk for war. Which means being willing to face danger and death.



And this was the second meaning. We ourselves, were getting into the Way of Jesus – stepping into the footsteps of the man who had willingly stepped into our barbed-wire choked world.

Getting in the Way: bold, gutsy, risky action coming from a place of liberating love and belief that the Life-Giving God has called us into this work. That for some of us, following Jesus and calling ourselves Christians meant going to the places in the world where there was pain and violence and doing everything we could to put a stop to it.

So when I read these words from the Gospel of Luke, these terse exchanges between Jesus and the people who met him on his way to Jerusalem, there is some of the same energy and purpose, the same drive and direction.

The problem that arises here is when you forget that the journey has a purpose. The purpose of the second journey, the journey into the unknown, into danger, is to accomplish something. Jesus is going to Jerusalem to do something.

Christian Peacemaker Teams discouraged the use of the ‘Getting in the Way’ motto. For one thing, it’s untranslatable. It’s a pun that really only works in the English language. In other languages you need to choose which meaning you intend – interrupting violence, or following Jesus. Maybe one day both will be synonymous.

But the real reason was that it put too much focus onto the Christian Peacemakers. After all, we were going by the invitation of peacemakers in Palestine, in Indigenous communities, in Iraq and Colombia and Kurdistan and Haiti. Those who we were going to support were the ones who took the risks, and bore the burden. Maybe we were travelling further from our North American churches and affluent suburbs, but they were making the real journey into the unknown. And like James and John, it was easy for us to misunderstand the vision.

Don't get me wrong, we never called down fire from heaven. But it is easy for visiting activists to provoke police repression or paramilitary violence that would target our friends.

Does anyone happen to know the current motto of Christian Peacemaker Teams? “*Creating Partnerships to Transform Violence and Oppression*” – that's the goal of the organization. The transformation of violence and oppression. The journey into the unknown is an important one, but we need to know why we are doing it. Where are we trying to get to? What is the end goal of the life of faith? And what is the third type of journey?

Let's give thanks to God who accompanies us faithfully on our journeys into danger, into the unknown, praying for good perspective to stay focused on our goals and recognise where our successes come from. Let's work and pray in solidarity with all those who are struggling for a life of safety, dignity and hope, to demolish human borders and oppressive systems, so that all can reach their journey's end.

Third Reflection (The Return Journey)

So here we are, on the Way with Jesus. We're at church on Sunday morning, or at least listening to the recording of the service. But why are we doing this? Where is this faith journey going?

To heaven? Towards union with God? Towards a future of ecological justice where the needs of all creation are in harmony and where all are free to live meaningful lives? Is our faith destination something that we can imagine? Can we only see it dimly, or not at all?

The third type of journey in the scripture is the journey of return. Homecoming. In the Hero's Journey of myth, the journey is not complete until the hero returns to the community with the gifts that they have won, and fixes the problem that sent them off in the first place.

But you can never return home. Because you have been changed by the journey. You have known loss and pain. You have grown. You are no longer the person who left.

The people of Israel were conquered by the Babylonians. Their leaders and educated people were taken away to serve the Babylonian empire. The book of Daniel records the stories of those times, resisting the assimilation efforts, and codifying their own culture by writing down their history. Later, when the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians the people were allowed to return home.

But it was not an easy homecoming. The returnees wanted to rebuild Jerusalem and return to the society remembered in their stories. But the land was not empty. They were returning to the descendants of those who had been left behind to fend for themselves when the pillaging army departed. Along with the surviving tribes and villages, they had developed and preserved their culture differently. Some had married people of other nations, which the returning exiles saw as a great sin.

It's interesting to note that the Samaritans are one of these groups, and to this day continue to live in communities centered around a recognisable form of worship. So when the disciples offer to wipe out the Samaritans, this is unfinished business from the homecoming journey that their ancestors made five hundred years before.

Even though homecoming is fraught with difficulty, it is a vital theme to understanding 'the Way' of Jesus, who is leading us back into right relationship with God and our neighbours and the whole of the created world.

When you think about where you are in your faith journey, which of these three types of journey seems to fit the best?

Is your faith a familiar journey through the known territory, where you experience God in your interactions with friend and neighbour?

Is your faith a journey into the unknown, the pilgrimage, risking danger for a necessary purpose, overcoming obstacles to safety and experiencing God as your guide and strength?

Or is it your faith the return journey, coming home to resolution and fulfilment, where you yourself are carrying the wisdom of God, the gifts of long struggle, to share with those around you?

All of these are true for different parts of my life, and I am sure they are for you as well. This summer as we hear many stories from our friends on the Way, stories of God at work for us, in us, and through us, get ready to receive wisdom, challenge, and comfort. We are not alone on this crucial journey. Thanks be to God.