

*In God we live and move and have our being*

Acts 17:22-31

My husband Mike grew up on a dairy farm close to the town of Goessel, Kansas. Their property joined with his uncle's property and the two families ran the farm together. Around suppertime on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 30 years ago, Mike remembers that the air was very hot and still and the sky was a kind of greenish colour – signs of a possible tornado. His dad was next door at his brother's place, but Mike was home with his mother and sister, Rachel. Their older brother Jeff was living in Germany at the time.

Sure enough, they soon saw a giant funnel cloud coming towards them from miles in the distance and it eventually split into 3 smaller ones. As the tornado neared their property, 13-year-old Mike grabbed the camcorder (that's an old video recorder, in case younger listeners are confused). Mike filmed as long as he could until his mom coaxed him anxiously downstairs and into the reinforced concrete storm cellar beneath their kitchen (a staple in many Kansas homes). Mike went on to sell his video to the news.

Rachel and Mike both remember the sound of the tornado as it tore through their property – the deafening roar of the wind and the sound of things being destroyed above them. And then the silence after it had passed. Mike remembers they waited a moment before emerging from the safety of the cellar – perhaps a moment of wishful denial or dread at what lay in wait for them upstairs.

Most of the outbuildings had been obliterated, but thankfully only a few of their cows had died. Their uncle's farmhouse next door had shifted on its foundation from the force of the wind. And both properties were a mess – covered with debris from the significant damage.

The response from the community directly following the tornado was overwhelming. Farmers came to pick up the dairy cows to take them back to their own farms for milking and volunteers came to clear the mess. Their teacher, Jane Hiebert, nicknamed General Jane by the kids, coordinated food-making for all of the volunteers as well as the Schmidt family. In a time of chaos, upheaval and deep uncertainty, neighbours helped restore a sense of order for the Schmidts and other affected local families. All of it had a huge impact on Rachel and Mike about the power of community and belonging.

I remember talking tornado with Mike and Rachel's paternal grandfather, Rudy. I was an urban girl with no farming experience in the middle of a doctoral program in religion and Grandpa Rudy teased me about what I was going to do with a PhD when a tornado hit. I told him that I'd be hiding in the basement with him.

Many people who are hit with one disaster or another do not necessarily experience the same community support that the Schmidt family did when the tornado destroyed their farm. This pandemic we are experiencing has revealed pockets of profound loneliness in the world and has emphasized the fundamental need we all have to belong.

I'm also aware of those who are not alone in their homes, but are suffering from the worldwide spike in domestic violence which makes the home a very treacherous place to be.

Like the Schmidt family farmhouse during the tornado, all of our homes have shifted on their foundations. The familiar has become unfamiliar. Like many, I have found it disorienting and stressful to negotiate the new reality of working and schooling from home. And I am leaning heavily on God's grace and the grace of my family to make this all work.

Something I have loved during Zoom church is that we are all invited, every Sunday, into one other's homes. Our living rooms, porches, basements, and even our bedrooms become a place of meeting and belonging. And despite our physical alienation from one another, I am learning more names because of Zoom and it makes me feel connected to you all.

It has been interesting to read about Paul's missionary travels while being stuck at home. Our family had made plans to travel this summer, but those plans have been put on hold indefinitely. So, for now, I'll live vicariously through Paul as he makes his way through present day Israel, Syria, Turkey and Greece.

Today, we've heard about Paul's journey to Athens, where he observes the presence of many altars, shrines and objects of worship. He approaches a group of prestigious councilmen and proceeds to butter them up, saying, "Athenians! I see how extremely religious you are in every way!" (Acts 17:22). This is a bit of a back-handed compliment. Paul praises the fervour of Athenian worship, but goes on to argue that they are ultimately practicing idolatry. He says, "The God who created the world and everything in it, and who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines [or temples] made by human hands" (Acts 17:24).

After high school, I decided to volunteer abroad for a year before going to university. First, I worked at a community centre in Belfast, Northern Ireland and then my friend Zoe and I volunteered at an orphanage in Calcutta, India. This very head has been blessed by the hand of Mother Teresa! Zoe and I used to joke that we had to go all the way to India to “find ourselves”, and to some extent, this was true. We certainly learned a lot about ourselves and encountered God in myriad ways – in the places we visited and the people we met. I thought about this trip to India when I read about our travelling missionary Paul this week.

Paul tells the Athenians, “From one ancestor, God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God – though indeed God is not far from each one of us. For in God we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:26-27).

Paul teaches us that God cannot be contained, but God is within us. God accompanies us on our travels through life – as we experience new cultures and places and as we shift on our foundations and adjust to new realities within our own homes. I’ve been thinking about how staying at home right now can be its own form of pilgrimage. I don’t need to go anywhere to seek God, because indeed God is not far from each one of us.

A dear friend of mine named Jenn is a pilgrim and researches pilgrimage. She has walked thousands of miles on sacred paths through Spain, Portugal and Scotland and is writing a book about her experiences. She was supposed to embark on another pilgrimage this summer, but is stuck in her house like the rest of us. Jenn and I have talked about what it means to embrace the pilgrim spirit from home and she sent me an article called “Transformative Pilgrimage” by William S. Schmidt.

Schmidt writes about some of the psychological and spiritual aspects of the journey within the self, particularly when dealing with grief and loss. Zoom may connect us with others outside of our homes, but it is also a stark reminder that we are separated. It is a reminder that we have lost something important. Many of us feel the grief of this loss – and not only us extroverts!

Schmidt says that a journey within the self is about “encountering the transformational power of the sacred in the midst of what is being lived.” Right now, we find ourselves plopped down into the middle of a journey that we did not anticipate or plan for. Consider it an unintentional pilgrimage. Furthermore, we don’t actually know where the road will end. But we can still lean into our “lost-

ness and disorientation” and grope for the God who is always near to guide us on our sacred path.

I think about how disorienting it must have been for Mike and Rachel’s family to be forced to rebuild their home after the tornado, both literally and psychologically. They must have experienced a sense of loss and grief, like many others in their community. But this loss also became an opportunity. Their dad, Fred, used to say that the tornado was the best thing that ever happened to him because it allowed him get out of dairy farming. He became an electrician and was much happier with the freedom that lifestyle afforded him and their family.

In conclusion, we don’t need to go to India to find ourselves or to experience a transformational pilgrimage. We can embrace the pilgrim’s spirit within our own homes. We can be stuck at home with the God who is not far; the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

I’ll end with the words of J.R.R. Tolkien taken from the tale of the ultimate hero’s journey: *The Lord of the Rings* (Part I).

<i>The road goes ever on and on, Down from the door where it began, Now far ahead the road has gone And I must follow If I can.</i>	<i>Pursuing it with weary feet, Until it meets Some larger way, where many paths and errands meet, And wither then? I cannot say.</i>
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### **Questions to consider...**

1. If you think of this time as a pilgrimage, what would be some of your spiritual goals?
2. How has Zoom church fed you during this time of separation?
3. How has your experience of ‘home’ changed?
4. What are the ways in which God has felt both ‘near’ and ‘far’ for you?